ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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16 NEW STORIES OF DETECTION AND SUSPENSE



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By Alvin Tresselt, *Dean of Faculty*

IF you want to write and get published, I can't think of a better way to do it than writing books and stories for children and teenagers. Ideas flow naturally right out of your own life experience. While it's still a challenge, the odds of getting that first unforgettable check from a juvenile publisher are better than they are from just about any other kind of publisher I know.

Later on, you may get checks from other publishers. But right now, the object is to begin—to break into print—to learn the feeling of writing and selling your work and seeing your name in type. After that, you can decide if you want your writing to take another direction.

But after 40 years of editing, publishing, and teaching—and 53 books of my own—I can tell you this: You'll go a long way before you discover anything as rewarding as writing for young readers.

The soaring children's market

Your words will never sound as sweet as they do from the lips of a child reading your books and stories. And the joy of creating books and stories that reach young people is an experience you'll never have anywhere else. But that's not all. The financial rewards go far beyond most people's expectations because there's a huge market out there for writers who are trained to tap it. Over $1.5 *billion* worth of children's books are purchased annually—some 4,000 different titles—many by new authors.

And over 400 children's magazines rely on freelancers to fill each issue.

Yet two big questions bedevil nearly every would-be writer: "Am I really qualified?" and "How can I get started?"

"Am I really qualified?"

This is our definition of a "qualified person": It's someone with an aptitude for writing who can take constructive criticism, learn from it, and turn it into a professional performance. That's the only kind of person we're looking for at the Institute of Children's Literature.® The reasons are simple: Our reputation is built on success, and if prospective students don't have the aptitude, we probably can't help them. And we tell them so. It's only fair to both of us.

To help us spot potential authors, we've developed a revealing test for writing aptitude. It's free, and we don't charge for our evaluation. But no one gets into the Institute without passing it. Those who pass receive our promise:

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One-on-one training with your own instructor

I've learned a lot about writing for children and I love it. Now I'm passing my knowledge on to my students so they can profit from it. When I'm not writing my own books I spend my time at the Institute, a workshop for writers that does one thing and does it better than any other educational institution I know of: It trains qualified people to write for the young reader.

This is the way I work with my students, and my fellow instructors—all of whom are experienced writers or editors—work more or less the same way.

When you're ready—at your own time

Alvin Tresselt, Dean of Faculty, was Executive Editor of Parents' Magazine Press, the first editor of *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine*, and a board member of the Author's Guild. His 53 books for young readers have sold over two million copies.

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to write children's books"

and your own pace—you send your assignment to me and I read it and I reread it to get everything out of it you've put into it. Then I edit your assignment with a well tempered pencil, just the way a publishing house editor would—if he had the time. I return it along with a detailed letter explaining my comments. I tell you what your strong points are, what your weaknesses are, and just what you can do to improve. It's a matter of push and pull with each assignment. You push and I pull and between us both, you learn to write.



The home of the Institute of Children's Literature, founded in 1969.

The proof of the pudding

This method really works. I wouldn't spend five minutes at it if it didn't. The proof of the pudding is that many students break into print even before they finish the course.

Connie Wooldridge, Philipsburg, PA, who has sold two stories to *Highlights for Children* says, "As an at-home mother of four, I have so appreciated the way the Institute is set up: it has provided me with the professional contact and guidance I needed to get a serious start as a writer without the hassles of babysitters, long drives, and hard deadlines."

"—finally...the support and direction I needed."

"The letter with the return of my first assignment was so kind and encouraging I started to cry," writes E.D. Mahr, Hinsdale, IL. "Here, finally, was the support and direction I needed."

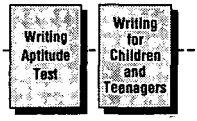
Ken Fleming, Staten Island, NY who reports a sale to *Cricket* Magazine says, "To know that more than 120,000 children will be reading my words gives me a feeling of great satisfaction. Thank you all for giving me so much for so little."

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Thirty-seven years ago the first issue of AHMM was published, bearing a cover date of December 1956. It was one hundred forty-four pages long, contained eight stories and two "novelettes" (stories of about thirty pages), and cost thirty-five cents. Among the authors in that first issue were Jim Thompson *(The Grifters)*, William F. Nolan *(Logan's Run)*, and Fletcher Flora *(Killing Cousins)*.

In this thirty-seventh anniversary issue, we have sixteen new stories to present to you, including tales by five authors new to us.

Peg McLaughlin, author of "The Jester's Foot," Marty Cann, author of "Outrage at the Short Mystery Club," and Angela Zeman, author of "The Witch and the Fishmonger's Wife," make their fiction debuts in these pages.

Ms. McLaughlin, who temps as a legal secretary and has worked for "(at last count) almost one hundred attorneys," lives in Washington, D.C., where she learned a good bit about publishing during a stint at a trade magazine. "In my misspent youth, I was a member of the American Puppet Theatre, a group of volunteers who worked at the Library of Congress and spent nights and weekends sewing puppets, painting backdrops and performing our musical show for children in the D.C. area." She has also written a column for a regional magazine on housing matters.

Marty Cann, now retired, has a column to his credit, too,

(continued on page 85)

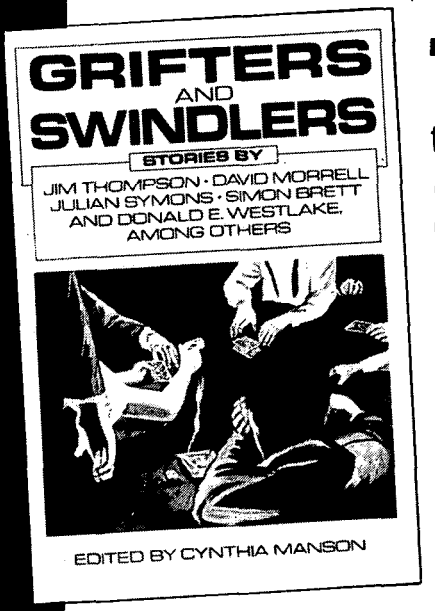
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The Jester's Foot

by Peg McLaughlin

I was hacking away at the multiflora rose hedge with a pair of debilitated clippers the morning Hal Benson returned to his home on the Cape.

He had junked the vintage Chevy with the scratches on the fins where his kids tested "gold" coins before he caught them at it. Or maybe it had been junked for him, come to think of it. His new set of wheels, a bright yellow VW bug, looked like a rolling halved lemon.

He bobbled down the unpaved track past my clippers and swung into his driveway without a glance my way. I snipped another thorny branch and did a quick mental scamper through my Emily Post. When a man comes home from months of treatment for a nervous breakdown, after a car smash killed his wife and two kids, what's the neighborly thing to do? Is it too late for casseroles?

I had done the Samaritan bit right after the accident. Forsaking my thesis on Perkin Warbeck, I drove Hal's sister Claudia out here to Padstow to clear his Cape house of memories. She was convinced the sight of Kelly's dolls and JoJo's tennis racket would send him into a tailspin. Neither of us realized then how deep Hal's well of depression was. I'd nursed a guilty passion for my grandmother's lanky neighbor in my teens; I suppose that trip was my tribute to a bittersweet memory.

You'd be amazed how much bric-a-brac kids leave behind when they've gone for the season—never mind for good. Claudia and Granny Cabral and I cried ourselves dry while we packed away three lives in neat cardboard boxes and arranged for storage. I babysat those kids every summer from the time they were toddlers—and little hellions they could be, to be honest—but they were only eleven and nine when it happened. Life's stinking sometimes.

My current problem was, all that happened back in the depths of November, and here we were setting sail into May. In the interim I'd lost Gran, my oak post in the gale, and inher-

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CARLY ORDERED SCOTCH. "WHO DIED, DEENIE?
AND WHY ARE YOU BREATHING FIRE ABOUT IT?"

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ited her Cape house. In April, when I came into a tiny trust fund from a half-remembered godfather, I'd finally chucked poor old Perkin in a footlocker and settled out here on Cape Cod. I'd long since cried all my tears. I hoped Hal had, too.

Hal used the side entrance of his cottage. At least, I didn't see him again, and the blinds in his kitchen twitched open.

Gran's hedge looked as though Goliath the Rodent had been gnawing at it. High time I got my cousin Sam to sharpen those clippers; besides, I needed supplies. I straddled my aged ten-speed and popped the clippers in the rear basket.

Padstow, our local village, is a few sand-blasted buildings in search of an identity. Cape Cod stabs into the Atlantic like a jester's foot, toe pointed north. We're on the high arch of the foot, but you won't find us on most maps. Our mail says Wellfleet, which is just around the curve of the harbor and popular, I can tell you. Better known and slicker, they suffer the full impact of tourism; we settle for glorious weather and a little peace. Padstow's natives are descended from Portuguese fishermen; its summer families, like flocks of geese, migrate with the seasons, Boston to Bermuda to Padstow and back again. I'm a rare hybrid, half native, half goose, and move a little uneasily between the two worlds.

I was propping my bicycle against Dulcie's Market when a blue Checker sedan slid to a halt beside me and Carly Whitehead leaned out.

"Hey, Tess, was that Hal Benson in that awful car?" she demanded through a cloud of cigarette smoke the color of her well-shaped hair. The curious faces of five Abyssinian cats peered around her shoulders.

I was used to that battery of eyes. You rarely saw Carly *sans* cats. "He just got in," I admitted. "But—"

"Don't worry." She shoved a cat off her shoulder. "I'm not the Welcome Wagon. Did he speak?"

"To say what?" I asked, exasperated.

"Hello would be sufficient," she said dryly, waving a cat's whiskers away from her glowing cigarette, "or he might explain who those two drifters are who've camped in his boathouse."

"What two—"

"Saw them yesterday evening, when I was fishing in my dinghy." She grinned, pleased to be first with the news. "Looked like beach bums —backpacks and cutoffs. Seemed to be setting up house."

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Hal's boathouse is around the point, out of sight of my place. It's weathertight, but surely he could do better for visiting friends. If they were friends. If he knew.

"Okay," I sighed. "I'll ask him."

"Just like to be sure," Carly nodded. "Where's your mom these days?"

"Cannes." I bit off further comment.

"Saw where your dad's schmoozing an earl's daughter." She grinned, inviting me to see the joke. Which I did, when I was in the right mood.

Joe Cabral had been Padstow's auto mechanic when Mama seduced and married him to spite her snooty Brahmin family. They couldn't retaliate much because she'd already inherited slices of two states from her grandmother. The Colorado chunk was near Vail, and the Texas bit, you'd better believe, was not just mesquite country. So Joe acquired champagne tastes, and Mama acquired me, then chucked him out for some peccadillo she'd never discuss. She must have paid him a wad for the divorce because Joe promptly took his new polish and his old charm and worked his way along the Social Register. He couldn't go much higher than Mama, but an earl's daughter might be a half-step up if you counted snob value. I hadn't seen Joe in fifteen years.

"He was holding out for a princess, but they're all under age," I said deadpan.

Carly hooted, pleased at getting a rise out of me. Her car lurched, ground its gears, and purred away. She always was a rotten driver.

Cousin Sam Cabral, our mechanic now that Joe had bigger fish to fry, pronounced my hedge clippers terminal and sold me an almost new pair a summer visitor had abandoned. To my question, he nodded.

"Sure. Two guys on scooters. Night before last. Didn't ask directions." His seamed face showed no curiosity. Sam preferred machines to people.

I worked my way through the breadline at Dulcie's, then cruised homeward. The Carlisles had arrived, I noted, and Deenie Durham's Jag was in her drive. Since it was Tuesday, they'd probably be here for the week. Maybe that clambake on Friday wouldn't be a complete bust after all.

I coasted to a stop at Hal's picket fence, feeling a mite shaky. The worst thing about a small town is sometimes you get tapped as designated busybody. Neighborhood Watches have nothing on us. Today, of all days, had to be my turn.

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When Hal swung the door open at my second rap, he startled me because aside from his pallor, he looked the same as ever: long, bony face, hazel eyes, thick lashes, floppy fair hair. I'm five foot eight, but he topped me by half a foot. I took a step back to ease the crick in my neck.

"Sorry to bug you while you're settling in, Hal," I said, brisk and chatty, "but Carly—I heard there were some boys in your boathouse—"

"They work with me," he said flatly, baritone a little husky. From disuse? "Don't let them worry you."

"I bought some extra bread and—" The door, which was swinging shut, paused and reopened.

"I bought supplies on the way." Hal being patient is something to back off from. I backed another step. "I expected some privacy here. Why aren't you on the Riviera with your mother?"

I didn't see why I should be held responsible by all and sundry for my delinquent parents. "I'm slumming," I retorted and swung on my heel. The door clicked shut before I hit the porch steps.

I flounced home, tugging my bike, and took my irritation out on the multiflora rose. The edge of those new clippers made mincemeat of half the hedge before I cooled off.

I pedaled over to the Yacht Club for dinner. Actually, it's just a big gingerbread house with a flagstone terrace, sloping lawn, and narrow beach, donated to Padstow by Emily Beale, a wealthy old harridan who hated her relatives. On her deathbed, she willed everything else to the Old Seaman's Home—and did they have a party!

"Tess, baby! Come on over!" Deenie Durham, seated at one of the ironwork tables on the terrace, raised her martini in greeting.

I settled beside her, feeling, as usual, like a giantess. Deana Durham is a gorgeous elf, dainty as a porcelain teacup.

"Where's Sandy?" I asked, signaling for Raoul, the waiter—another cousin.

"Slaving in his rotten laboratory, I hope," she said viciously, taking a long pull at her martini. A marble-sized diamond on her finger flashed. "Just because some computer jockey snuffed himself—"

"Who snuffed himself?" Carly asked, plumping herself down beside us. "Anybody I know?"

"You smell!" Deenie cried, edging toward me. A whiff of breeze hit me, and I coughed at

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the pungent odor of mothballs pouring off Carly's dress.

"Like it?" she asked archly, fingering the layers of mauve lace over brocade. "Lady from Provincetown found it in an old trunk and asked me to repair the lace. Turned out so nice, I thought I'd air it out."

"Well, air it downwind of me," Deenie choked.

Carly shrugged and shifted to a chair down-breeze of us. Raoul caught her scent and stumbled slightly as he brought my glass of wine. Carly's business placard read, "Seamstress and Sailmaker"—and she wasn't kidding. She claimed sails "just take bigger stitches."

Carly ordered scotch. "Who died, Deenie? And why are you breathing fire about it?"

Deenie raised her delicate chin in a pout. "Sid Schneider, a kid who worked at Sandy's lab. He went up to *our* cabin in the Berkshires last weekend and hanged himself from the rafters. Ugh! I'll never set foot in the place again."

"Why your cabin?" I asked.

"Oh, he had some grudge against Sandy," Deenie said vaguely. "But why pick on me? I'd never set eyes on the twerp. That doesn't stop those dolts from security, asking their nosy questions and pawing my belongings. I finally came over here to get away from them."

"The lab handled government projects," Carly commented.

Deenie grimaced. "Sandy says they think this creep was selling the lab's computer programs. That's all *they* know! Maybe he found out they were suspicious and decided to take the easy way out. But my precious husband," she almost chewed the words, "is not utterly irreplaceable. He can't possibly spare a few days to spend with me."

"Drowning your sorrows will only add a headache." Carly patted her hand. "Now Hal's here, maybe—"

"Hal's here?" Deenie demanded.

"What's he got to do with it?" I chorused.

"Hal is—or was—the ringleader of this asinine, super-secret computer team," Deenie explained impatiently. "Sandy only took over after Sharon's accident, and I've hardly set eyes on him since. They've been expecting Hal back for months. And he has the nerve—"

"Hal's a professor at M.I.T.," I said stupidly. Claudia hadn't mentioned any job change when we were clearing Hal's house, but we hadn't talked much, come to think of it.

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Carly shook her head sorrowfully. "All those years at school really pruned you off the local grapevine, Tess. Hal moved to the laboratory more than a year ago. Said he needed to earn some real money for—"

"Well, I have a few choice words—" Deenie began, rising.

Carly yanked her back. "You, my girl, are going to stop feeling sorry for yourself and let that poor man alone," she said in a low voice that carried command. "It wasn't a sprained ankle that took all these months to heal, it was a mind."

Deenie subsided, rubbing her wrist. "Why did he have to go all dramatic when Sharon died?" she muttered. "They'd been on the outs for more than a year before it happened. She was shopping for a house for her and the kids—"

"Deenie!" I gasped.

"*You* didn't know, wrapped up in your books," she spat. "Hal was just like Sandy—always working. Sharon was fed up."

"Sharon wasn't all he lost, Deenie." Carly was looking daggers at her friend. "Don't take your personal problems out on Hal."

"Fat chance I'll have," Deenie shrugged; shedding the martini-induced nastiness with her usual mercurial shift of mood. "He knows Sharon told me everything," she smirked. "He'll steer clear of me."

"He made it glaringly obvious that he wants to pull a Garbo when I stopped by this afternoon," I agreed, sitting back now that the tension had eased. "By the way, Carly, Hal says he knows those two are using his boathouse."

Carly shrugged as she lit a cigarette. "Better safe than sorry."

I was gardening in my back yard the next morning when Hal's beach bum pals slouched up the path from the boathouse and inspected the tool shed at the bottom of the Benson garden. Sharon had been a fiend for flowers; that shed contained every tool imaginable. Gran used to borrow from her shamelessly, which explained the dull clippers and two rusty trowels I found in our own toolroom.

The men were a mismatched set: both medium brown of hair and skin, clad in T-shirts and cutoffs, but one tall and thin, the other short and blocky. Mutt and Jeff to the life, I thought. They sniffed around inside the shed a few minutes. Hal had said they were guests, so I held my tongue; but those two had never learned company manners, I can tell you. They finally strolled east toward the Atlantic beach. I lost

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interest, enthralled with cutting back Gran's clematis, which had gotten above itself and was trying to eat the back porch.

I was parched by eleven o'clock and decamped to the house for some "shade and 'ade." When I came out later, the air was stifling and the sun glittered on the harbor where a sailboat lay becalmed. Winter storms had tumbled some small boulders into the bed of Gran's rock garden. Despite repeated tries, neither my fingers nor the trowel could shift them. Blast! I'd have to borrow a spade from Hal.

I flicked a glance at his house. No movement at the back windows. He need never know. Wiping dirt from my palms, I strode to a break in the hedge and headed for the rich lode of that tool shed. The door was ajar; the bums evidently didn't care who knew they'd been snooping. With another guilty glance at the blank windows of Hal's house, I slipped inside the shed.

The interior was as dim as a mineshaft after the sunlight. Still glare-blinded, I sensed movement and ducked instinctively as something whistled past my ear. The door banged back on its hinges with the missile's impact, spearing the gloom with a swatch of light. A bulky shadow in the corner was rearing to its feet as the light hit it. It materialized into a surprised man—but where a face could reasonably be expected, there was just a blurred outline smeared by a stocking mask. In his left paw was a long-barreled handgun.

You can't run fast enough to beat bullets. I leaped to my left, where the tool racks stood, and grasped the nearest handle. In one smooth motion, powered by amazement and rage, I wrenched it free, twisted my whole body with the spade flailing, and let fly at the man's head as he straightened.

It would have taken his head off if he'd been my height. As it was, the point of the flying spade hit him in the sternum with an audible thunk. Something kicked up a spout of dirt at my feet as he grunted and clutched at his chest, dropping the gun. The spade had hardly left my hand when I was grasping the next handle on the rack.

It was just as well I took no chances because the intruder was built like a bison and that first blow had only doubled him over. He was still on his feet, staggering toward me, mouth gasping horribly through the nylon. I swung the metal rake hard, prongs out, and caught him a blow on the shoulder that jarred me clear down to my

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sacroiliac. I was lifting it for a jab when, with a guttural curse, he dodged out the door and slammed it behind me.

In the plunging dark, I flung the rake down and dived toward the far corner. Landing on my knees, I patted desperately along the dirt floor for the gun, adrenaline pumping like a waterspout. My hand hit something covered with cloth, glanced off, froze, then crept back in slow motion. It was a leg.

I staggered to my feet and backpedaled until I came up against the door. Fumbling for the latch, I lurched out into the garden. I did have wits enough left to glance around first, but the bull had escaped that particular china shop. A small runabout carrying two people was arrowing toward the becalmed sailboat. I stared after it, delaying examination of what the bull had left behind.

Taking a deep breath—my first in minutes, it seemed—and quaking like an aspen, I propped the door open and turned to assess the damage. In the moted oblong of sunlight I could see two ankles bound by rope. One large stocking sported a hole in the heel. I knew there was an overhead light, but I was too rattled to find the switch. After a couple of fumbles along the left-hand wall, I gave it up and approached the bound feet.

The toes wriggled. I nearly jumped out of my own socks. Then I was on my knees, dragging the bound man to a sitting position—with little assistance from him, he was too busy groaning. It was Hal, masquerading as Billy the Kid. A bandana was tied across the lower half of his face, and his hands were tied behind him. I braced him back against the workbench and scrabbled for some scissors.

Scissors may cut paper, but I can testify they make little headway against whatever they're making rope of these days. My brain finally clicked into gear, and I sprinted back to my own yard. Hal was coming around by the time I returned. When he saw me advancing on him, hedge clippers at the ready, his eyes showed a lot of white.

I snipped through the leg bindings first, then edged around to get at his back. He was awake enough by then to stretch his hands well away from his body; with his mouth still covered, I couldn't hear his prayers. When the rope fell off, I undid the bandana for him. Beneath it was a strip of adhesive tape. Hal dealt with that himself while I slumped beside

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him and ordered myself to stop trembling.

That was when I noticed something really odd. Not that finding your neighbor tied up in his own tool shed isn't odd, mind you, but this was, frankly, bizarre. Hal was chafing his wrist and noticed it at the same time. Someone had stripped a yard of insulation from the business end of a power cable and coiled the exposed copper wire four times around Hal's upper arm. Our eyes followed the thick cord up to where it dangled from a socket in the ceiling. The same socket that operated the overhead light—which I had been trying to turn on minutes before.

"Get it off!" I muttered through clenched teeth, but Hal was already ripping the device off his arm. He gave a stiff downward yank and the cord slithered to the floor like a dying rattler. We sat in silence, staring at it, our feet poked out into the sunlight.

"Shoes," Hal finally croaked.

I found the light switch this time, although I hesitated before flipping it. A brief search turned up his rubber-soled shoes under the workbench. The gun was there, too, but I left it. Hal donned his shoes, staggered to his feet unassisted, then flexed his shoulders—or maybe it was a shudder.

"Drink," he said, walking very deliberately toward the door.

I couldn't agree more.

Hal excused himself while I poured brandy into paper cups, which was all I could find in his kitchen. When he returned to his dining room, he was decidedly paler. He downed his "juice" and held the glass out for more.

I poured liberally but asked, "Should you drink?"

"It was chloroform," he said wearily, flopping down in a captain's chair. "No concussion."

I made inroads on my own drink, a slow burn down to the heart.

Hal finally took a great breath, released it, and looked across the mahogany table at me. "What happened out there?"

I 'fessed up to my plan to plunder his tools and described the ensuing struggle. No, I told him, I'd never seen the man before. I'd have remembered anyone with shoulders that size. One of which should be stiffening up nicely, I thought, but I didn't want to brag.

"I was thinking about buying a guard dog," Hal said when I finished. "I may adopt you instead." He smiled down at his

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drink, but the humor was a little sour around the edges.

A knock on the back door made us both jump like scalded cats. I listened intently as Hal went to answer it. A jumble of male voices, then he returned followed by his boathouse guests. Close up they looked less like the Hardy boys and more like fighters in training, young bodies with cynical eyes.

"Mutt and Jeff think we've been hallucinating," Hal said, showing them in.

"Mutt and—" I swallowed a giggle. "Bodyguards?" I asked brightly, to be met by fish eyes. "Or just guards?" less brightly.

"We're just—observers," said Mutt.

"And what were you observing fifteen minutes ago?" I demanded acidly.

"A boy almost drowned—" He had the grace to redden.

"You claim you saw the, uh, attacker?" Jeff drawled.

"A tall man, beefy shoulders, square face, wearing a stocking mask," I recited impatiently. I glanced out the window. "The boat's gone. You'll find his gun in the shed."

"Weird way to do anybody in," suggested Mutt.

"Inefficient," agreed Jeff.

"And not even original," I finished.

Jeff's eyes were unfriendly. "Elucidate, lady."

Hal was scowling at the table and gave me no encouragement "At the club last night Deenie Durham told me a computer programmer from her husband's lab hanged himself at their mountain cabin," I finally said, watching the odd twosome and wondering where they fit in. "It reminded me of a story I read awhile back about a number of British scientists who'd committed suicide or died in questionable accidents."

"Go on." He leaned tanned knuckles against the table.

I shrugged. "That setup in the shed, plugging Hal into the electrical circuit—it was exactly like one of those so-called suicides."

Hal's face looked like unleavened dough, destined never to rise. While Jeff turned to confer with his colleague, he rounded the table and leaned against the wall beside my chair.

"You always were the nosiest kid," he muttered. Which ungrateful comment left me, finally, speechless.

For their own reasons, Hal and his two "guests" refused to report the attack. Admittedly, Zeke Beebe, our lone policeman, is stretched to handle fender benders; he'd probably have had apoplexy if he heard our story. Besides, the sailboat in which the bull escaped wasn't local; ditto the bull him-

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self. Not really worth the energy it would take to pursue, Mutt decided. Jeff looked grave, and Hal took another drink. I was not consulted.

Mutt and Jeff eventually retired to the boathouse, leaving Hal and me staring at each other.

"Are you expecting any further visitations?" I finally asked. "Can I work in my garden unarmed?"

Hal grimaced and shoved the hair back from his forehead. "I can't say—"

"—what's going on," I finished in disgust. "Well, my analysis," I said, standing and stretching, "is that either you are under suspicion of something heinous, or you've been staked out as a Judas goat by those two morons. As the goat's next door neighbor, I'd like to register a protest. You might make that dog a mastiff."

I banged the screen door hard and stomped back to my immovable rocks. They reminded me of my neighbor.

All was quiet on the western front of the Cape for the next two days. I puttered around the house making notes of jobs Uncle Ernando could repair at special family rates. Carly called once, asking what had sent Deenie to the bottle—which was news to me. I put her off, then thought it over and gave Deenie a ring.

"Oh, Tess, I can't stop now." Deenie sounded breathless. "Look, come by on the way to the clambake. We'll talk." And she was gone. Seemed perfectly normal to me.

I kept one wary eye cocked toward the Benson property, but Hal never left the house. His guests were equally discreet.

I donned a sweatshirt and shorts for the Friday afternoon clambake at the Yacht Club and biked over to the Durhams'. The curtains were drawn, and there was no response to my repeated knocks, although Deenie's car was in the drive. But knowing her, she might have forgotten me and walked the short distance to the club. I had given up and was retrieving my bicycle when a front curtain twitched. I paused, waiting for Deenie to come bustling out in her usual attempt to catch up with time, but the fabric stilled and the door remained unopened. After a minute's frowning hesitation, I pushed off for the club.

Carly, in painter's pants and shocking pink sweatshirt, was seated crosslegged on the club's lawn milking advice from Reg Dooley, our local veterinarian. Her cats were absent, a club

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rule since the day one of them seized Mrs. Farmington's lobster from under her shrieking nose and made itself sick on the subsequent feast. Carly now locked them in the Members' Library when she attended club functions. I plopped myself down on the grass and asked if she had seen Deenie yet.

"Not a sign," she said, and paused for a pull at her cold beer, "but she's never on time. Why?" Reg excused himself, sensing one of those female conversations that real men avoid. "Man can only discuss one subject," Carly said speculatively, staring after his retreating back.

"Carly," I insisted, "I stopped by Deenie's. Someone peeked through the curtain, but nobody answered the door. *Is* something bothering her?"

Carly pulled an earlobe. "You heard her. She's been wailing at the top of her lungs for Sandy to come and pay attention to poor little her. Maybe she's—"

"But she planned to come to the clambake." I accepted a beer from Raoul as he made the rounds.

"Far as I know, she was looking forward to it," Carly said idly, eyes on the harbor, then glanced at me sharply. "For pity's sake, Tess, you're as jumpy as a cat on a hot griddle. She probably decided to stay home with—"

Carly's mouth fell open in mid-thought. I swung around, beer slopping, to see Hal strolling across the club's terrace like Lazarus on parade. He came down the steps with a wave for the staring commodore and made a beeline for us.

Carly had control of her mouth by the time he reached us. I busied myself mopping beer off my legs with a napkin.

"Carly, Tess," he said pleasantly, squatting down to our level with a nod for the closest group of members. They smiled uncertainly and turned away. "Is Deenie here?"

"What's this sudden fascination with Deenie?" Carly demanded.

"We were supposed to meet at her place, but she didn't answer the door," I told him, ignoring Carly. "Why? What's the matter?" His face had grown grave, and he stood abruptly. "Hal, wait!"

I scrambled to my feet, dropped the beer can, and sprinted after him. Carly called out, but I ignored her. Two peaceful days since my encounter in the tool shed had done nothing to calm my stripped nerves. Hal the Hermit arriving at a social occasion made my stomach lurch. Hal concerned for Deenie—

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I caught him at the door of his silly car. We stared at each other, then he popped the passenger door open and ran around to the driver's side.

The Durham house remained blank-eyed. Hal banged on the door, then reached up to the lintel to produce a key. His hand shook as he fitted it into the lock, twisted it savagely, and thrust the door open.

The smell of lemon polish enfolded us as we glanced into the living room. Sunlight poured through the open front curtains. A naval clock chimed the quarter hour.

"Those curtains were closed before," I told Hal.

He hurried down the hallway, calling Deenie's name. The house echoed as though it were deserted. I took a deep gulp of air and headed straight back through the house to the least likely place—the kitchen.

Deenie's tousled head had fallen forward on the breakfast table. An empty bottle of gin teetered on the table's edge. I felt under her delicate jaw for a pulse. It was so faint it took me a few panicky seconds to find it.

"Hal!" I called, easing Deenie back in the chair. Her face was talc-white and slack. "In the kitchen!"

He skidded around the doorway and hurried to my side. Gently raising one of the unconscious woman's eyelids, he held her wrist and counted a full minute. "That's not just booze," he said grimly, reaching for the wall phone.

Deenie was so cold it frightened me. While Hal called the paramedics, I fetched a sweater from the hall closet. Hurrying into the kitchen with it, I discovered Mutt and Jeff entering the back door. Fast work—Hal must have signaled them somehow. I shot them a glare that should have brought on multiple coronaries and wrapped the sweater around Deenie. With all the subtle charm I was beginning to know and love, the two men barely gave her a glance before they began to nose around. Mutt lifted the gin bottle, using his shirttail, and sniffed before carefully replacing it on the table edge. Jeff retreated, and I heard the boards creak in the bedroom next door. Hal gave me a flat stare, then fetched an afghan for Deenie's legs.

The charming twosome had plip-plopped away on their scooters by the time the medics arrived. They asked some quick questions, put the bottle into a bag for analysis, attached an I.V. to their patient's arm, and trundled Deenie out the front door.

"She'll have to be 'coptered to Boston," the older of the two

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told me as they slid her into the ambulance. "Looks like a botched suicide—barbiturates. Zeke will be calling you." They took off in a spurt of gravel.

"Suicide, my eye," I said bitterly as Hal joined me. "Deenie Durham never had a suicidal thought in her selfish little life."

He glanced down at me, startled.

"People like Deenie don't kill themselves," I said impatiently, turning back to his lemon. "If you were convinced you were the center of the universe, would you leave voluntarily?"

"I thought you were her friend," Hal said, following me.

"I love Deenie like a sister," I told him in surprise. "That doesn't mean I don't see her faults. And let her know about them, sometimes." I slid onto the hot seat of the bug. "Personally, I've never felt like I was at the center of anything—except an occasional slanging match between Mama and Joe."

"You were the center of your grandmother's life. I've been meaning to—"

"We should call Sandy," I changed the subject abruptly.

"Leave that to the medics." Hal turned the ignition key. "I gave them his work number—for what it's worth."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded.

Hal's face was grim as he swung onto the road toward home. He flicked me a glance, but his set jaw gave forth no reply.

"Look, Hal," I began, temper rising, "I'm getting pretty sick of wandering around inside your private funhouse without a script. I almost got shot the other morning, if you remember. Today one of my best friends may be dying. Isn't it about time you let me in on the secret?"

"Can't," he stated. Discussion ended.

"Then I'll have to call Zeke Beebe and tell him what's been going on," I replied.

"I'll break your pretty neck," Hal said, casual as how d'you do.

I could hear my teeth grinding. "I should have flicked that light switch," I muttered.

His glance was amused. "It's almost over, Tess." He tried to pat my knee, but I jerked it away.

When we pulled into his driveway and the engine died, Hal turned to me. "Tess," he said gently, resting one elbow on the wheel, "I promise no one else will get hurt."

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I started to tremble and could feel my throat tightening —with anger, I told myself. "That'll do Deenie a lot of good," I gulped.

Hal came around to open my door. He pulled me up out of the car and held me close.

"How touching," a dry voice said. I twisted out of Hal's arms to find Jeff watching, arms akimbo. Behind him stood a gangly redheaded man in jeans and a tank top.

"Sandy!" I stared at Deenie's husband, who should be in his Boston laboratory. "Where did you come from? Did they—"

"Zeke just called, Tess," he said grimly, his eyes on Hal. "I was supposed to be trying to reach my dying wife, wasn't I, Hal?"

A frown developed between Hal's brows. "What are you talking about?"

"You gave the medics my lab number," Sandy bit off the words, pale blue eyes flashing, "but security switched it to my cellular phone last week. I've been staying in your boathouse since yesterday afternoon."

"We thought Mr. Durham might need to be—uh—mobile," Jeff grinned, but his eyes stayed cold.

"Well, I'm glad you're here, Sandy," Hal said, running a hand through his hair. "The paramedics—"

"—think Deenie will make it," Sandy interrupted. "You didn't wait long enough for the drugs to work."

"Did a better job on his own wife," Jeff suggested.

The breeze off the harbor was cool, but not enough to give me that sudden sensation of freezing. "Hal couldn't—" I croaked, then swallowed painfully. "His kids were killed! Sandy!"

"Sharon was supposed to leave the kids with the sitter, wasn't she, Hal?" Sandy asked, his voice tight with suppressed anger. "You didn't know she was leaving for good and taking them along."

I turned slowly to look up at Hal. He was watching Sandy intently.

"Mrs. Benson called our office," Jeff added, "before she left home. Said her husband might be hawking the lab's programs. Sour grapes from a neglected wife, we thought. If you'd left her alone, we might never have given it a second thought. Pretty nasty people you were dealing with, professor. Why did they try to fry you the other day? Cutting their losses?"

Hal took a step backward, moving into the angle between the open passenger door and the car. His face still looked as though he were striving to understand a foreign language. I

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turned to speak to Sandy, to question, to demand, but a flash of movement brought me swinging toward Hal. A small gun had sprouted in his hand—and was aimed point-blank at my midriff. His eyes, however, were fixed on Jeff, who had gone rigid.

"You're finally going to listen to me," he spoke quietly. Let us reason together. "Who do you suppose planted those stupid suspicions in my wife's mind? The same man who tampered with my car's steering column, maybe? Killing Sharon wasn't his plan, but it worked—it got me out of the lab. And once I was gone, he finally had access to all the data, not just the crumbs."

Hal's knuckles were white, and the gun was developing a decided tremble. I found I couldn't swallow any more.

"You saying Mr. Durham went to all that trouble just to get you out of the way?" Jeff drawled, looking skeptical.

"You'd better go back to the shrinks," Sandy blurted. "You're paranoid. What would I have to—"

"Whose wife has been drinking like a fish and might let something damaging slip?" Hal was unrelenting. "Deenie's had a long time to mull over Sharon's accident. Did Sid's death start her thinking some nasty things about you, Sandy? For instance, how did Sid get into your cabin?"

Jeff cocked his head and slanted a glance at the man beside him. "There was no—"

"He had a key." Sandy looked defiant, like a child caught with a shattered piggybank. "I've already told them. We'd been having an affair. We met at the cabin sometimes. *That's* why Deenie—" his voice choked off and he put a hand to his forehead.

Hal snorted. "You mean poor Deenie was so shocked she tried to kill herself?" he scoffed. "Amazing—since she told Sharon two years ago that she knew all about your so-called affairs. You'd be surprised what women tell each other. What was so different about this one with Sid? Or was Deenie just a bit nervous about how the kid died?"

"You're wasting our time, professor," Jeff interrupted. "We've been over all this—"

Hal ignored him. "How did Sid die, Sandy?" he demanded, voice thickening. "You wouldn't dirty your own hands. Must have been the same punks you sent after me, right? Same bizarre sense of humor. I'll bet it was a shock when you found out he died in your own cabin. But you still needed them to eliminate me, didn't

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you, so your meal ticket would be safe? So you could have the house in the Berkshires and the cottage out here and diamonds to keep Deenie quiet —and the job you thought you deserved."

Hal's gun remained trained on me. Only a couple of feet separated us; I waited for it to waver by a millimeter.

"I think you should take a closer look at my old pal here," Hal addressed Jeff again. "For instance, how's he been financing the good life?"

Hal was so intent on convincing Jeff that, for a crucial instant, his grip on the gun slackened. I tensed my muscles for a leap and was glancing around for a place to dive when the look on Sandy's face stopped me. In that instant, when he thought no one but Hal was looking, he was smirking, pale eyes alight with unholy glee. He looked—triumphant.

By the time Jeff turned toward him, Sandy's freckled face showed only puzzlement and a sort of pity. "Investments," Jeff was replying in a Sahara-tinged voice. "You've been away a long time, professor. It's all been checked and doublechecked."

Our friend Sandy turned his gaze to where I stood rooted, staring at him. He shook his head slightly, inviting me to share his distress at a fine mind gone round the bend. Abruptly my world righted itself and I wasn't cold any more.

Mutt tiptoed around the corner of the house, approaching Jeff and Sandy from behind. Hal ignored him, and Jeff, who must have seen his colleague's sneaking approach out of the corner of his eye, did the same. "Professor, give us one fact," he said softly, "to choose between the pair of you."

Carly's Checker lurched down the sandy track and staggered to a halt at the end of Hal's drive. She emerged with a waterfall of curious cats and strode toward us.

"I stopped by Deenie's, but there was no one—" She noticed Deenie's husband then. "Hi, Sandy," she nodded casually at him while she stopped to remove a half-grown Abyssinian from her pants leg. "Boy, was I ever relieved to see you with Deenie this afternoon. She's been driving me crazy with her whining. Is she here?"

The silence that greeted her was deafening. One of the older cats was exploring Sandy's ankle and mewling to itself. He shoved it away impatiently. "I've been in the boathouse ever since I got here," he said irritably.

At the club, I suddenly remembered, Carly had said Dee-

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nie might have stayed home with—

"Where did you see them?" I demanded, deciding to take a hand in this game. The men were making a mess of it.

"On the beach behind their house." Carly, cuddling the angular feline under her chin, seemed to become aware of the tension for the first time. She stared at me, but my body blocked her view of Hal. "I was fishing off the point. What's—"

"Must have been someone else," Sandy insisted, kicking at the long-legged tom, who had developed a passion for his ankle.

"Oh, come on, Sandy." Carly looked disgusted. "How many tall, red-headed men could be cuddling Deenie on her own beach? Just because my hair's gray doesn't mean I've gone blind."

I turned to Jeff. "Was Sandy with you earlier this afternoon?"

Jeff shifted uncomfortably. "We've been tailing the professor. After the other morning—"

Red patches showed on Hal's cheekbones and the gun really and truly shook now. "You're slime, do you know that, Sandy?" He almost choked on the words. "This won't be murder; it'll be an execution." He raised the gun in two hands, elbows braced to aim at his former friend.

Mutt and Jeff were playing statue, letting the two men have it out. Carly was too far away to intervene. I hesitated—remembering Hal lying bound on that shed floor and Deenie's limp form in the ambulance—and folded my arms.

Sandy's calm fled as he stared wild-eyed at Hal, then at the unmoving Jeff. "You can't!" he squeaked. "They'll kill you for it!"

"What do I have left to live for?" Hal demanded coldly. "Besides, I can plead insanity, can't I? Thanks to you."

"I didn't mean to kill the kids," Sandy babbled, freckles standing stark against his paling cheeks. "Deenie didn't tell me Sharon was going to drive your car. I never meant to hurt them!"

Mutt broke his pose and took a step forward, but Sandy, sensing the movement, dodged sideways before Jeff could react. Hal swung the gun to follow his target and bashed me in the collarbone, sending me reeling against the lemon bug. Cursing, Hal tried to correct his aim, but by then Mutt and Jeff were only steps behind the fleeing man as he sprinted down the driveway toward Carly and the open door of her sedan.

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Carly sidestepped to avoid Sandy's rush, the limp Abyssinian raised high above her head out of harm's way—and dropped the startled cat on Sandy's back as he dashed by. Screaming like a banshee, the terrified animal scrambled for purchase on the running man's bare neck and shoulders. Exposed skin around his tank top was shredded by needlelike claws as Sandy doubled over, yelling and swiping at his attacker. The cat, naturally, bit him, which brought an additional howl of rage. As Jeff drew level and grabbed Sandy's arm, the young feline, ears flattened, dug his claws into Sandy's back muscles, launched himself to the safety of the ground, and scampered off to join his companions, tail stiff with outrage.

Jeff jerked both Sandy's arms up behind him while Mutt puffed to a halt and produced handcuffs. Sandy, still squirming, shot Hal a murderous look.

"I should have known. You wouldn't have had the nerve to shoot," he spat.

"I almost did." Hal sounded infinitely tired. "You're a destroyer, Sandy. My family, Sid—even your own wife, just to save your own skin." He dropped the gun in the sand of the driveway and stared at his betrayer. "You're only breathing now because I want to know you're alive a long, long time—staring at four walls."

"I think we can guarantee that now," Mutt agreed. "Come on, buster." They frog-marched Sandy toward the boathouse, probably to call for backup. They certainly needed all they could get.

Hal, Carly, the cats, and I retired to Hal's dining room. The cats had cream. While we drank something stronger, I told Carly, in choppy sentences, the events that led up to Sandy's downfall. When pressed, Hal admitted that the scene we'd witnessed was staged by the terrible twosome at Hal's insistence. Sandy's "investments" had turned out to be some dry oil wells that paid a surprisingly healthy return, but security wanted hard evidence that would place him squarely at the heart of at least one of the murders. The three conspirators were caught off guard and forced to improvise pretty briskly, he added, once Carly and I poked our noses in.

As we finally bade him goodbye, Hal thanked us for helping with "his problem."

"What are neighbors for?" was Carly's reply.

Human lives are at least as delicate as antique lace, but are not so simple to repair.

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Hal left the next day for the lab. Someone had to run the place. Eventually Sandy pleaded guilty to all charges. He'll be staring at those four walls the rest of his life. Carly heard from Deenie when she got out of the hospital. Even with his illegal earnings, Sandy had lived well beyond his income; Deenie was selling the Berkshire, Cape, and Newton houses and planned to travel to Europe to forget. I sent her a note with Mama's address in Cannes. They'll get on like a house afire.

There's a nip of autumn in the air now. Gran's house is repaired, and I've been settling in to brave the winter alone here on the jester's foot, just me and pages and pages of Perkin. Yesterday Uncle Ernando started weatherproofing the Benson house. He told me Hal has found a successor at the lab and will be arriving in a few weeks.

It looks as though I'll have a neighbor for the long cold winter.

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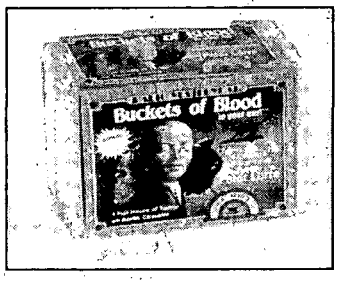
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Kinship

by Stephen Wasylyk

Through the plate glass I could see Woody Barr marching diagonally across the street toward my street-front office, crewcut and broad shoulders canted six degrees forward of his normal head up, shoulders back, get-the-hell-out-of-my-way erectness.

About right. Tomorrow night at eleven would make a week since Alfie Moser had been shot as he was about to enter his car after leaving the house of his mistress, and when the sheriff couldn't immediately wrap one big fist in the collar of the miscreant who murdered one of his constituents, he sagged about a degree a day.

He pushed open the door, ignored Marvelous Mary's bright "Good morning," and glared at me.

"Got a minute?"

Mary's eyebrows went up as she reached for a pad. Probably making a note for a future lawsuit.

I grinned. The two came from opposite ends of the spectrum. To Woody, a woman's place was in the home. He'd probably never married because he'd never found one willing to stay there. As far as Mary was concerned, God had always intended women to rule the world but had been too busy straightening out the mess men had made to put His plan into effect.

Not wanting any furniture broken, I said, "Why don't you take a coffee break, Mary?"

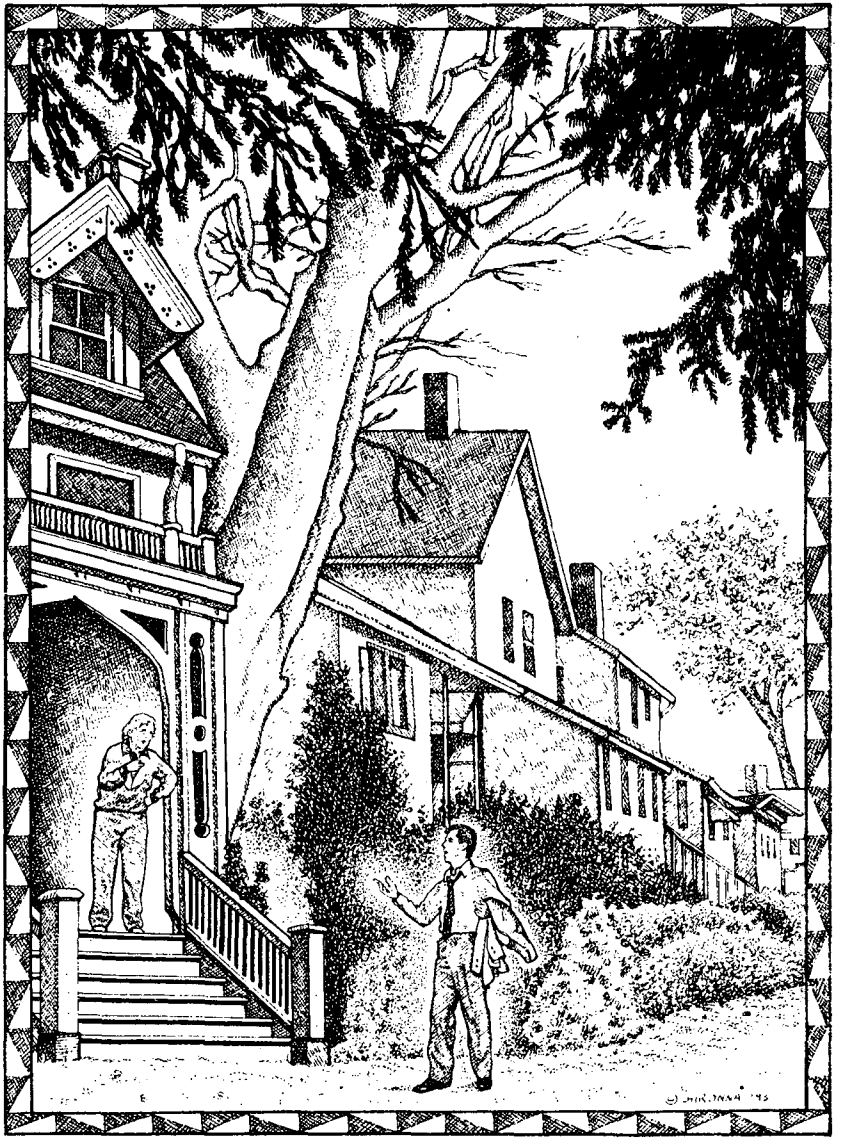
She sniffed at Woody as she passed, and we watched her float by the window. She moved gracefully for a stocky woman.

"How you can work with that woman is beyond me," said Woody.

"That's because she probably set fire to your animal pelt in a previous existence after you bopped her because dinner wasn't ready. She's intelligent, articulate, sensitive, tenacious, and a born saleswoman. I assume you're here because you're still floundering around."

"Floundering. Good word. See that editorial this morning? About the only one Adams didn't use ranting about why I haven't yet arrested the killer

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"MRS. GUIDRON? I'M WORKING WITH SHERIFF BARR.
I'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE MURDER."

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of one of the town's wealthiest and most prominent citizens. And comparing me to the politicians who have forgotten why they were elected."

Ah. That was why he was here. Comparing Woody to a politician could be dangerous, but instead of punching Adams in the nose, he'd come to me. There had been past occasions when the facts weren't the facts and the truth wasn't the truth and I'd helped him sort them out, so he wanted me to look into this one. Wouldn't come out and ask, though. A great deal of pride filled out that tan shirt along with the muscular chest.

An opening to volunteer came a half hour later.

"Look, Woody, I'm going up on the hill this afternoon to check out a new listing. Any objections if I look around while I'm there?"

"If you think you can learn anything, go ahead."

A returning Mary held the door for him as he left, knowing, of course, that little act of equality would help ruin his day.

She looked around. "Sure he took his club and loincloth with him?"

I grinned. "I'm having an early lunch so I can run up and have another look at the Ronstead house."

"If you find anything we didn't notice before, let me know real quick. I have someone coming in about it this afternoon."

The attorney handling the estate had turned it over to me only yesterday, and while I was still debating how much we could get for it, she probably had it sold.

Marvelous. Showed I'd made no mistake in judgment the day she walked in six months ago with her new broker's license and announced she was going to work for me. Children grown and husband busier than ever, damned if she'd sit around the house. She was short, a bit heavy, combed her hair straight, wore clothes that ignored fashion trends, had a round pleasant face, soft brown eyes, and a smile that wrapped itself around you like a warm blanket. Luckily I'd had enough sense not to ask why she'd selected me or to say no.

In the coffee shop around the corner, I was pleased to see Norma back from her romantic, sun-filled, spring cruise on the glorious Caribbean.

She smiled at me. Until she'd gone, I hadn't realized how much I'd looked forward to seeing that smile each day.

I settled back in a corner booth, munching on both a tuna on rye and the problem of

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Alfie Moser, and hoping that no one spotted me and stopped to chat. This was a time for thinking, not conversation.

Alfie had been a short man on the wrong side of fifty with more girth around his waist than his chest and a very bad hairpiece he wore combed forward to show he was a "with it" kind of guy, which he reinforced by using words like supportive, stress, the pain of, I'll be there for you, take charge of your life, and bonding. You couldn't go to any sort of civic function without finding him at the head table, spouting social cliches and insisting his was the only way to do things.

He'd fiddled around for years trying to make his fortune until he acquired the first Japanese car franchise in the county. People laughed. Another loser. Who'd buy those little boxes when you could buy a *real* car? Twenty years later, he had three dealerships and was sneering at all of us, bad hairpiece and all.

He also had an ex-wife, a present one, and a mistress—a true role model for budding entrepreneurs everywhere.

The primary people the law scrutinizes are always those close to the victim. In this case, Number One was Marji Sutton, Alfie's mistress, but several people had said they'd seen the porch light of her house come on and Marji run from the house after hearing the shot, so it appeared that Marji was out of it.

Number Two was Alfie's ex-wife, Maggie. Now an underpaid, undertipped waitress, she didn't blame her own appalling lack of judgment, faith in her husband, or both, for her low quality existence. With an ex-wife's logic, she blamed Alfie, and let it be known that one of these days she intended to ship him to the Great Crusher in the Sky like one of his battered trade-ins.

Number Three was his present wife, Peggie. As specified in the Millionaire's Handbook, she was the younger, prettier, mandatory blonde.

When Peggie learned of the mistress, she publicly declared she'd drop Alfie into oblivion before becoming a pit stop on the road to the goal stated in boldface on page 49 of the Handbook—arriving at age seventy-two with a nineteen-year-old Miss Universe contestant on your arm.

I finished the tuna and picked up my cup as Norma walked by, the quivering of her clinging dress turning the coffee into nectar.

Number Four was Hamilton Endicott, an erstwhile salesman at one of Alfie's dealer-

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ships. He'd been romantically involved with Marji Sutter until Alfie convinced her that an older luxury model with all the options and a great deal of mileage left in it was preferable to a newer one that offered only a five-speed transmission and quick pickup.

Ham was handsome, six feet tall, his head and face covered with hair more suitable to a mountain man than a car salesman. Presently convincing customers to buy American at an Olds dealer, he'd been heard many times to predict Alfie's imminent demise at his ham-like hands. Those who knew said his enmity was due more to losing access to Marji's money, rather than Marji.

None of the suspects had alibis, but Woody couldn't prove any was near the scene of the killing. He also faced the possibility that the killer had been a freelance holdup artist Alfie had unwisely resisted. Or even a disgruntled employee or a dissatisfied customer. Alfie was of the school that believed both were always wrong.

His principal witness was Mrs. Guidron—nee Neubeir—octogenarian widow of the town's leading obstetrician. Anyone who read anything but the sports pages had come across her name and picture at one time or another. She had first voted in 1932 to help sweep her father into the mayor's office on the coattails of FDR. Not one to sit at home while her husband delivered babies, she had worked for many years in the D.A.'s office. D.A.'s came and went, but she went on and on, testimony that while political influence could get you a job, you need competence and ability to keep it.

Living alone almost directly across the street—stoutly refusing to employ live-in household help she could certainly afford—Mrs. Guidron told Woody she'd been dozing in a chair near the window. Roused by the shot, she looked out in time to see a dark figure run down the areaway between the Lutheran church and the house next to it. She then observed the robed and barefooted figure of Marji Sutter appear on her porch and run down into the street, where her screams woke the rest of the neighborhood. Mrs. Guidron tottered out to join her at the prostrate body of Alfie.

Paying Norma, I cocked what I considered a romantic eyebrow.

"Cruise deliver as promised? Glorious nights in the arms of a handsome fellow traveler under an enormous subtropical moon while the ship's orchestra

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played softly in the background?"

The blue eyes would put the Caribbean to shame, and the face, showing just a hint of tan, would never peddle shampoo or dentrifice in a TV commercial but would look good at any hour of the day or night and twenty years hence. So would the short, gleaming, honey-colored hair.

"Five nights, five men," she said. "Did you miss me?"

"The thought of suicide crossed my mind several times."

"I missed you, too. The ship was really loaded with gray-haired widows and twenty-five-year-old merengue dancers." She allowed her fingers to linger on my hand as she handed me my change.

I managed enough control to say, "Talk to you later."

"You know where to find me."

I floated to my car. She'd come to town from some vague place out West a year ago—exactly the type of quiet, attractive widow to make a widower's house seem emptier than ever. I wasn't the only one in the chase, but I was beginning to feel I had the edge.

The hill on the west side of town where the rich folks lived had wide streets lined with elms, oaks, and sycamores, and huge houses built during the twenties that required plenty of ready cash to maintain.

It hadn't been available at the Ronstead place. In a story familiar to all, Mrs. Ronstead's income had been adequate enough when her husband died, but remained static while everything else went up. Gradually the choice became one of maintenance or eating, really no choice at all, and the attorney settling her estate said she hadn't even been well fed when she died.

I wandered through the empty rooms. What remained was walnut, oak, brass, solidity, and craftsmanship. It would take a bit of money to make it good for another twenty years, so the prospect list was very small. Yet Mary already had someone coming in. No wonder I called her Marvelous.

I locked up and drove to what is always termed the scene of the crime.

Circumstances there were different. Marji had not only inherited the house but, as a Sutter, plenty of cash to keep it up. Enough, it was said, that she'd be wise to extract a prenuptial agreement from big-spending Alfie, if the romance ever got that far. She worked as a cashier at one of his dealerships because it amused her, not be-

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cause she needed the salary, which, knowing Alfie, had to be minimal.

Beautiful young woman with a B.A. degree, Woody said, but still in junior high as far as life was concerned.

I parked across from the church and lowered a mental shade over the sunlight to imagine what the street was like at night. The old pole-mounted street light at the corner would keep the Lutherans from stumbling on the steps of the church, but the budding curbside trees would kill the yellow light before it went very far. Someone running into that light would become clearer with every step, but the night deficiencies of Mrs. Guidron's ancient eyes would have required the assistance of a battery of floodlights. Lack of detail in her description of the figure was only to be expected.

I'd asked Woody why someone would wait for Alfie. Wouldn't it be likely he'd spend the night? Anyone who took the trouble to look into it would know he never did, Woody had said. While she might tolerate his infidelity, Peggie still demanded an appearance of propriety.

Some marriage arrangements puzzled me.

I followed the route the figure had taken. To my left, a head-high hedge above a low stone wall kept the people in the house next door from seeing what the Lutherans were up to. Woody's men had examined every leaf and probed every inch of the soil beneath it, in addition to scouring the entire neighborhood and searching every corner sewer inlet to be certain the gun hadn't been thrown away as the killer fled. The heavy granite of the church sat on my right.

At the rear, a sharp-spiked ornamental wrought-iron fence separated the church from a narrow alley that had once served for trash and garbage collection until the trucks had become too big to fit. Running into it at full speed in the dark would have turned an unaware perpetrator into instant human shish kebab. Woody believed the killer had turned right, his car parked on the street only fifty or sixty feet from the gate in the fence. I turned left.

High fences, low fences, small lawns, others with garden plots showing the signs of early spring attention, walks leading to flights of wood steps and small back porches. Marji's house was no different. Utility was the architectural watchword for the rear of the homes of that era.

I came out onto a strictly residential cross street and re-

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turned to my car, looking at the church and wondering if I'd overlooked something.

"Hey!"

A small white-haired woman wearing gray sweats and white walkers glared down at me from the wide verandah of the big brick house. Even at that distance, the glare was enough to quick-freeze a large steer.

"Looking for something?"

I ambled up the walk and beamed my most charming smile up at her.

"Don't stand there grinning like an imbecile! I asked you a question."

The white hair was thinning, but it still maintained its natural waviness and she kept it cut short to highlight a face with very few wrinkles, the skin stretched over fine bones. The hazel eyes were certainly not cataract-dimmed and were still sharp enough to get into a man and look around.

"Mrs. Guidron? I'm working with Sheriff Barr. I'd like to talk to you about the murder."

"I know you. You're no cop. You're a realtor."

"I'm undercover today. Out for your two mile run?"

"Hell, no. I'm undercover, too. As an active person. What are you really up to? Looking for bargains?"

"Looking into the murder, as I told you. I help Woody out once in a while as a civic duty. Sort of a two heads are better than one deal."

"As a politician's daughter, I'm always suspicious of people who talk about civic duty. What's in it for you? The town has to rehab one of your termite infested houses?"

"You're talking to The Last Remaining Patriot. My services are absolutely free. I understand you saw the killer running away."

"Hey, in detective novels private eyes have to pay for information."

"You got it, babe. Do I slip you a Hamilton or a Jackson?"

She hooted. "If I wanted money, you'd need a Cleveland. Follow me."

She led me up the driveway to the rear of the house. No maintenance problem here. The lawn was clipped, shrubbery trimmed, flowerbeds mulched, wood trim painted. She pointed at a large black plastic trash container at the head of the porch steps.

"Drag that to the curb for me. Tomorrow is trash day."

I bumped the heavy container down the stairs, hoping I didn't acquire a slipped disc or double hernia. "What's in here? A discarded lover?"

"I ran out of those years ago. It's a bit heavy because I de-

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cided I no longer needed my utility bills from 1950 to 1970."

I dug my heels in and pulled the container after me. "Seems to me you'd hire someone for these little chores."

"Lord, if you aren't a real busybody—she comes in twice a week but doesn't move trash. Doesn't do windows, either." She wagged a forefinger. "Stop complaining and pull. As I told Barr, I didn't see much. Heard the shot, opened my eyes, and saw a figure disappear alongside the church. Didn't know what had happened, of course, because I couldn't see under the trees. Minute or two later, Marji's porch light came on. Then I heard her scream. When I got to the street, she was standing over Moser, in her robe and barefooted, and still screaming."

I settled the container into position at the curb. "You know Marji?"

"My family and the Sutters have always been friends. I suppose they're all spinning in their graves—Marji taking up with a middle-aged, fat little man with fake hair. You'd think she'd have shown better judgment. Not criticizing what she did, understand, but who she did it with. She was brought up to show better taste."

"My sensitive side tells me you didn't like him."

"Potbellied, arrogant little jerk. Strutted in and out of the house as if he owned it, whether she was there or not. Giving a man a key is always a mistake. When the romance dies, you have to get the key back or change the locks."

She sounded as though she'd learned the hard way. "Whether she was there or not? Why? No attraction in an empty house."

"As the boss, his time was his own, you see, but she was an employee, so on the nights the dealership was open late she'd have to stay until closing. Coworkers may not mind if you're shacking up with the boss, but you'd better not take advantage of it by not doing your share of work. He was there first that night."

"What time did she get home?"

"I have no idea. I may be nosy, but I don't make a career of it. What difference does it make? You and the sheriff go find the man I saw running away." She held out a thin hand. "Thank you for the assistance. I really don't have anything important to do, but deluding myself that I have a heavy schedule keeps my blood flowing, so goodbye."

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The ex-marine in Woody would have been proud of the way she marched into the house.

In the office, I found Mary ready to leave with a couple dressed as though the best they could afford was one of the small, old houses along the river. Until they'd won the lottery, it had been. Now, with an annual income of two hundred thousand for the next twenty years, they wanted something better. Who wouldn't? The one I'd intended to show them came with five acres, a three car garage, a driveway a quarter mile long, state-of-the-art security, five bedrooms, a swimming pool, spa, and hot tub, and so many bathrooms no one had yet found them all, and she knew it.

She held out her hand for the Ronstead key, smiled at the look on my face, and said, "Trust me."

When they pulled up outside several hours later, I could see that everything was settled except for signing papers. The woman actually hugged Mary and kissed her on the cheek.

She settled at her desk, expression smug, lighted a cigarette, and held it with her fingertips, watching the smoke curl upward. She smoked only when she made a sale. The real estate business being what it was, there were occasions when her pack grew stale.

"It's called know your client," she said. "The house you had in mind wasn't for them. They wanted something they could live in, not display their good luck. Five kids. She took one look at that big kitchen and saw herself getting them off to school. One look at the dining room and she saw all her relatives there for dinner. One look outside and she saw all the room she wanted for her roses. Him? One of those husbands who doesn't give a damn where he lives as long as she's there. If she wanted a tent, he'd buy the biggest one he could afford."

"Do me a favor," I said. "Go home and humiliate someone close to you."

Even if this had been one of those evenings we held the office open, I'd have closed it to celebrate. You don't often move a house like the Ronsteads' in one day. I turned the door sign to "Closed" and walked to Woody's office in the basement of the municipal building down the street.

Woody leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "Well?"

"I looked the scene over and talked to Mrs. Guidron. What time did Marji get home?"

"Never asked. Is it significant?"

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"Who knows? Moser had a key. He let himself in to wait for her that night. Common practice, according to Mrs. Guidron. Also, in deference to Alfie's chosen field, have you considered that you've been stalled for a week because someone sold you a car with a hidden defect?"

He let that stir around in his head until he translated it. "You mean someone is lying. Mrs. Guidron?"

"Not necessarily, but I've talked to no one else."

"Why should she? When I got there, she was propping up the Sutter girl, and when I asked, she could have simply said she'd seen nothing. How would I have known anything different?"

"That's *your* problem. Mine is talking Norma into having dinner with me this evening."

"Helluva friend you are. Come in here, spout nonsense to get me more confused than I already am, then take off in lustful pursuit of the most attractive widow in the county."

"Lustful pursuit? It will be my first date in two years."

He grinned. "Motivation doesn't change because you're a slow mover."

When the entree grows cold and the wine grows warm because the conversation is so interesting, you have to figure the parties are compatible, but before dessert arrived, Norma was well on her way to Preferring to Have Stayed Home and Watched Lousy Television.

Halfway through the meal, my brain began trying to tell me something, behaving like Dr. Frankenstein's lab; liquids gurgling, sparks crackling, lights flashing.

I couldn't have concentrated on pleasant conversation even if Sigourney Weaver had been seated across from me.

Norma's eyes had moved from the Caribbean to the Arctic, telling me this budding romance was one step from being administered the coup de grace. She dabbed at her lips with her napkin. "I hope the ers, ahs, and how about thats have nothing to do with me."

Since I had no idea what my brain was trying to tell me, I could only mumble something about Woody and Alfie Moser.

"It seems to me that a man who abuses a woman ought to be shot."

"I'm not sure Alfie could be classified as abusive."

"Naturally. You're a man."

I'd heard that before, of course, but she delivered the line with the viciousness of a karate chop. I don't talk well at all when stunned.

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One message my brain had gotten through was "go look at the scene at night, dummy," so after I dropped her off, I drove back to the hill. A line of trash containers and bags had joined Mrs. Guidron's twenty year collection of old utility bills at the curb to await the morning pickup.

Big problem these days—trash. Time was when all our back yards had a perforated fire barrel, primarily for burning leaves but also very handy for disposing of anything combustible—like old utility bills. Environmentalists had killed that.

The lab in my mind was still gurgling, flashing, snapping, and crackling.

On the night Alfie had died, the trash trucks would have already been through. Anything you wanted to get rid of since then would have to await tomorrow's pickup after which it would disappear forever in a landfill. Bodies had been known to disappear into landfills.

I looked at the forlorn, half-full trash bag on Marji's curb and at the heavy container on Mrs. Guidron's.

Boom! The lab exploded. Twenty years of old utility bills? Which could have been discarded at any time. Why now? Possibly to help conceal something in a container only half-filled because she would normally generate only as much trash as another single person like Marji? I'd always told Woody that if I wanted to get rid of something, I'd wrap it well, bury it deep in a trash bag, and be reasonably sure it would never be seen again, which couldn't be said for dropping it in a river or burying it somewhere.

I left the car, lifted the lid, and queasily slipped my hand into the dark interior. If I was wrong, my only reward would probably be some heretofore unknown disease that would send the entire country into another spasm of health hysteria.

My fingers worked their way through dry sheets of paper—among other wet and slimy things I dreaded even to speculate about—until they felt a plastic bag holding something soft and yielding. I pulled it out and kneaded it. Beneath the softness was something very hard. Like metal. And although its wrapping prevented sharp definition, it felt suspiciously like a gun.

I sat on the curb under the soft yellow light of the street lamp, holding it in both hands and looking at the church across the way. Behind me, I knew she was watching. Impossible for anyone to sleep until

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that empty trash container hit the sidewalk the next morning.

The gun was an old Luger wrapped in a white sweater and a dark blue skirt. The labels said they could only have come out of Maison de Jeanine—the mandatory local chic shoppe for the elite.

She'd looked at them in Woody's big hands and smiled. No, she didn't want her lawyer present. Nothing he could do for her.

The two families were always very close, she said softly, lives intertwined in a kinship as close as blood. The others scattered, she and Marji were the only two left here, so she felt she had to look out for her.

Her living room was so huge that the polished furniture faded into the shadows. The grand piano in the corner was probably worth more than some of the houses farther down the hill. There were framed photos everywhere of solemn people, laughing people; studio portraits and snapshots, many yellow with age. I had the feeling that all were still somewhere in the house.

A banker friend told her Alfie was using Marji. Cars hadn't been selling, and the banks were threatening to take over his dealerships. He was talking Marji out of enough money to hold them off. Fine. It was her money, but he was bragging he'd found an enjoyable way to stay out of bankruptcy at the cost of a little time. Once he'd drained her dry, he'd leave. No point in talking to Marji. She wouldn't have believed her. So when she saw the weasel leave the house, she went down and talked to him. She told him that if Marji's father was alive, he'd shoot him. He laughed. Her father is dead, he said. I'm not, she said. And shot him with the Luger her husband had brought back from the war in Europe. She went back to the house and came out again when Marji began to scream.

She shrugged. "What can the justice system do to me? Send me to a women's prison? At least I'll have someone to talk to during the day." She waved at the room. "Holding conversations with memories puts you in a white coat eventually, sheriff."

Woody turned off his tape recorder and sighed. Women committing crimes made him uncomfortable. He preferred his perpetrators to be men.

"I'll have this typed up for your signature," he said.

"Don't waste your time," I said. "It's a good story, Mrs. Guidron, but let's start again. To the sheriff, you're the dignified

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descendant of one of our old families, whose father was once mayor. Too honorable to lie. But I know what you're trying to do and why."

She frowned at me. Woody leaned forward, looking stunned.

"I hate to do this, but *in loco parentis* has its limits. If you'd killed Alfie, you'd have no reason to mention a running figure at all, much less one that disappeared alongside the church. Which means there *was* a figure. Unfortunately, you told Woody before you figured it out. You knew that eventually he'd ask himself, as I did, why the killer ran under the light of the street lamp with a dark neighborhood to choose from. Answer—only that route would take him where he wanted to go. Not to a car. No point in parking around the corner when it could have been parked in the darkness down the street. So he didn't turn right. He turned left. Why? To get to the back door of Marji's house and then out the front. I thought of it, but dismissed it because of the people who saw her emerge robed and barefooted. Very clever of her. She gave them what they expected. But no one is equipped with X-ray eyes. What was under the robe? Sexy nightgown? Nothing?"

Her glare could have brought on another ice age.

"Marji might have been naive, but she isn't stupid. When she decided to shoot Alfie for making a fool of her, she certainly didn't want attention focused on her. She knew he'd leave at about eleven whether she was there or not. So she waited and walked up to him. If she sensed things weren't quite right, Alfie would get an apology and a goodnight kiss instead of a bullet. But afterward? The shot could wake someone up, so she needed a little misdirection. She zipped past the church, through her back door, stripped off shoes, stockings, and skirt, messed up her hair, and threw on a robe. Two or three minutes later she was screaming over the body. Barefoot woman in a robe. How else would one be dressed after entertaining her lover? Who would think for a moment she hadn't been inside? Or connect her with the running figure? I'm sure you didn't. At the time."

Her silence was enough.

"Neither would a cop. And even if he did, he'd never have the nerve to peek under the robe of a screaming, weeping woman. I know I wouldn't. But Marji said or did something that gave her away. You picked it up."

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Her lips tightened almost imperceptibly. I smiled.

"That was it, wasn't it? When you helped her into the house, you noticed she was half dressed. When she told you how she planned to dispose of the clothes and gun, your experience in the D.A.'s office told you it was risky. You had a better idea. Why not put them in your trash? If the container had been at the curb that night, it would have been searched, but a week later? Not likely. And if someone did, your story was ready. Better your life, almost over, than hers, just beginning. No prints on the gun? You'd know enough to wipe them off. The clothes? Perhaps not your exact size, but close enough."

I waited again. "No protest? Good. Determining who bought and wore the clothes should be no trouble at all."

The glare had subsided into resignation.

"Don't hold it against me," I said. "If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have said a word."

She almost smiled. "No need to become maudlin just because I allowed you to put out my trash."

A little research showed the Luger had been brought back from the ETO by Marji's grandfather, not Mrs. Guidron's husband. The sweater and skirt had indeed come out of Maison de Jeanine on Marji's charge card. The blood and gunpowder stains proved whoever had been wearing them had pulled the trigger on Alfie, and the pH factor or hair or face powder or perfume or Lord knows what, said it had definitely been Marji.

Woody had asked why I hadn't bought Mrs. Guidron's confession.

Because, I said, Marvelous Mary reminded me not to leap to conclusions and to give some thought to the kind of people we were dealing with. Marji was a mixed up, volatile kid, but Mrs. Guidron's life had been honesty, honor, and all the good things. Years ago she'd have horsewhipped Alfie, but she'd never kill him. To protect Marji, however, she'd say she did and never blink an eye. Simple.

It was apparent that the D.A. would make some sort of deal. Finding twelve unbiased car buyers wouldn't be easy, and one of those big, expensive names attached to long hair and courtroom histrionics had been imported for Marji's defense. He'd already linked the case to wife beating, abandonment, deadbeat dads, comparative pay scales for men and women, and gender-based corporate promotion policies. By

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the time he was through, Alfie would no longer be just your everyday, run-of-the-mill sleaze, of whom we've always had an abundance, but a monster of inhuman proportions. Brushing the long gray hair away from his metal rims, he'd solemnly announced the case had Great Social Significance.

"Crap," said Marvelous Mary, succinctly and surprisingly. "If she'd popped him in a fit of anger, I could buy it, but she planned it like a shopping trip to Philadelphia. She's a disgrace, not a heroine."

Not everyone felt the same.

Norma stopped at my table as I was having lunch. "I understand you were responsible for the arrest of that poor Sutter woman."

I almost choked at the sharp, accusatory tone.

"Poor Sutter woman? She murdered a man to salve her wounded ego."

Silence, except for the sound of thirty pairs of lunchtime jaws munching away. Must have been the wrong thing to say. I tried again.

"If you're feeling sorry for her, don't. She not only killed him but was very willing to let an elderly family friend go to prison."

Her face was frozen. "Nevertheless."

Nevertheless? Mentally, I threw up my hands. I was guilty and Marji only an innocent victim and I had no idea why.

"See you tomorrow," I said when I paid my bill.

"I'll be here." Her tone said she wasn't looking forward to it.

I went out remembering how lifeless Mrs. Guidron's voice had been as she poured the tea. "I told her she should have come to me. We could have ruined him financially. Not punishment enough, she said."

Aflie hadn't been the only one Marji had destroyed. Why in the world would Norma defend her? And condemn me? Stretching sisterhood under the skin to the nth degree? There was a great deal of that going around.

When in doubt, ask an expert. In the office, I sat on her desk and asked Marvelous Mary, who'd carry a sign in any parade anywhere at any time, to explain it.

Fingertips tented, she considered what I'd told her.

"Did she ever tell you how her husband died?"

"No, and to my knowledge, she's never told anyone else, either."

The palms went together and the fingers pressed to her lips as though she was praying.

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"It's only a guess, but—" she said softly.

Outside, the brilliant spring day suddenly dulled; nothing to do with nature at all but caused by the gray pall that sometimes descends on the human soul when something or someone dies.

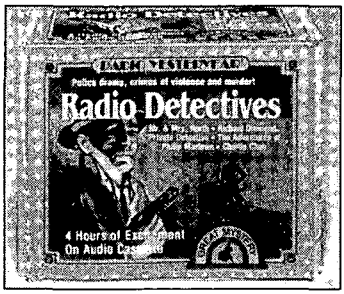
Only a guess. For her. Not me.

I was never more sure of anything in my life.

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Hot Wheels

by Steve Corwin

Robbie Sutton's puzzled look slid off the adults' faces, then returned to his fingers, twisting in his lap. His round face crinkled. "I didn't do it. I don't think I did it."

Mercy Archer snickered. "Of course he did it, that's why we're here." Her left hand, dwarfed by a diamond and ruby ring, rested on the tanned flesh above her plunging neckline. Her right hand caressed a platinum watch, and her grey eyes sliced through the boy on their way to his father beside him, who picked nervously at grease-stained fingernails and slouched deeper into his chair.

Sarah Shallott, every inch the conservative lawyer, tapped the collar of her blouse, buttoned to the neck. "We're here to sort this tragedy out, Mrs. Archer, not lay blame." Sarah's gaze softened as it moved to Carl Sutton, who spread his hands helplessly.

"Lord, I don't know. I just don't know. Sometimes Robbie gets things mixed up, you see, but it's not like him to mess up twice. If I ask him not to do something, he don't do it." Sutton tugged at his tie. "It ain't fair to blame Robbie. It ain't fair to make my boy go through life thinkin' he's killed a man. Even if it was an accident, like they says." He nodded toward Mercy and her stepson, Trent Archer.

Robbie twisted his head toward the corner of Sarah's office, his brown eyes pleading for help. P. J. McLean winked reassuringly. The air conditioner rattled in the background, straining to overcome the room's rising temperature.

Mercy stared defiantly at the five other people jammed into an elegant office better suited for one-on-one frays. The cunning intelligence burning behind her eyes overpowered the beauty of her high cheekbones and sensuous mouth, which twitched with something like contempt. "I'll let my stepson the lawyer do the talking. It's why he's here."

Trent Archer's ears turned scarlet, and his muddy eyes roamed Shallott's Oriental carpet before settling on a vacant spot between Carl and Robbie

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Sutton. "But there was a similar problem. When the boy damaged my car."

"I promised you that Robbie wouldn't touch customers' cars again, but—" Sutton twisted his shoulders "—my boy likes to help around the garage and I can't watch him all the time."

Archer's fingers twitched across his thin mustache. "Did your boy touch my father's car?"

"No!" The denial exploded from Robbie, who looked around panic-stricken before pulling his head back in, turtlelike.

McLean, sickened by the boy's terror, said gently, "Then you did not put power steering fluid in Mr. Rex Archer's brakes?"

Robbie shook his head violently.

McLean stared out Sarah's window at the distant Siskiyou Mountains, etched against the Southern Oregon skyline, before letting his gaze settle on Trent Archer. "Well, somebody did."

"Look, we all know the boy has, ahh, problems," Archer said. "We know without doubt that he put the wrong fluid in my car six months ago. I'm willing to believe it was an accident. We know my father left his Blazer with Sutton to have the brakes worked on, and we know power steering fluid was found in his brake cylinder by the sheriff's lab."

Sarah leaned forward. "Examined at your suggestion?"

"Yes, well, under the circumstances." Archer sounded defiant.

McLean toyed with a pencil as a conversation he'd had two days before gnawed at him. A mail truck driver he knew had made the same mistake and spent a harrowing two hours limping out of the mountains in first gear. The power steering fluid froze his brakes so badly that he had to replace the entire hydraulic system.

He was a fire investigator, not a mechanic, but this case looked like a loser, something Sarah didn't want to hear, ever. The boy's manful efforts to keep from crying jerked McLean back to his own childhood, and the day he learned his father would never come home from the VA hospital. His fist contracted, and the pencil snapped. He scanned the room, more in annoyance than embarrassment, and decided that no matter what the odds, Robbie deserved a chance for a defense.

At the moment, Trent Archer's eyes were lingering on Sarah's breasts. His smile was humorless, confident. "If you want to risk a trial, that's your

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business. There's no doubt brake failure led to my father's accident and subsequent death."

Sarah leaned back in her blue leather chair, fingers steepled as she contemplated Archer and his stepmother. McLean, studying the couple's profiles, wondered if calling someone two years his junior "mother" stuck in Archer's throat. He examined the lawyer's spindly thirty-year-old neck and figured almost anything would jam.

Sarah's voice was soft, persuasive. "You're absolutely certain you want to put this family," she nodded toward Robbie and Carl, "through the agony of a court proceeding that you may well lose?"

Mercy Archer rose abruptly. "This has gone far enough. We've tried to be fair to you people. My husband is dead and—" she pointed a bejeweled finger at Robbie "—that boy is responsible. My stepson," she gave Archer a curiously flat stare, "found his father's body, desecrated, burned, mangled."

She scowled across the room at Sarah. "We've suffered a terrible loss. Terrible. I'll have no more of this. Come, Trent."

Trent rose with a faint air of embarrassment, a twisted smile locked in place, and brushed against Mercy as he swung the door open. She hissed, and there was a short, angry exchange in the outer office before the front door banged shut.

Carl Sutton stared after them, his jaw muscles etched in hard ridges. "That man blames my boy, thinks I'm a fool and yet when he needed a tire changed, it was me he called." His work-roughened hands squeezed his thighs. "Maybe I am a fool, since I changed the damn thing." He rose reluctantly, shook hands with McLean and Sarah, and left quietly, a protective arm around his son's shoulders.

McLean moved to Mercy's still-warm chair, nudged it around to face the desk, and slouched down. Sarah's sour look mirrored his own feelings.

She wadded up the paper she'd been doodling on and hurled it toward the wastebasket. "I was a fool for allowing this meeting. It seems compassion simply doesn't run in that family." She pushed off from the desk, slid open the window, and in two short strides retrieved the crumpled paper, dropped it where it belonged, and shut off the air conditioner.

"They didn't leave with any more information than they came with," McLean said. "An interesting pair. Archer's not

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actually going to act as their lawyer?"

Sarah shook her head, her auburn hair cutting short arcs. "He'll have to get someone else, since he's his own star witness. But he's convinced it'll never go to trial. Given his track record with juries, he'd better hope not."

"Rocky Point going to settle out of court?"

"They will unless you find a reason not to."

"Did Robbie mess up?"

"I don't know. The child wants to please his father, more than anything in the world. If Carl told him not to touch customers' cars, he wouldn't." Sadness tinged her smile. "But it depends on how Carl worded it. Robbie is terribly literal."

Her eyes dropped to the insurance company's file in McLean's fist. "I'm afraid right now a jury will look at Robbie, feel sorry for him, and look at the widow and the insurance policy and . . . " She rose and paced the room in long, angry strides. "You know how it is. The insurance company will pay the freight, and Sutton won't be driven out of business. The Archers—" her eyes flashed, "—have been smart enough to ask only for the face value of the policy. It'll be the usual 'no one gets hurt but the insurance company.' "

McLean opened the folder. "Three million dollars' liability seems like a lot for a small garage."

Sarah grimaced. "That was my doing. Carl's also carrying a large life policy. He came to me right after Robbie's mother died. He wanted to provide for the boy in case anything else went wrong. He doesn't want him institutionalized, so, well, we loaded up on insurance." She sighed. "I still think it was the right thing to do."

McLean frowned at the color photographs of Rex Archer's Blazer, fire-gutted when it ran off a back-country road and into a house-sized boulder. He'd seen worse, but repetition never dulled the nagging sense of waste that accidents always triggered.

Rex Archer had picked up the vehicle from Sutton's garage and headed straight into the mountains for his annual autumn hunting trip. He had said the brakes grabbed, but Sutton couldn't find anything wrong. As a courtesy the mechanic had cleaned the shoes and flushed the hydraulic system.

Trent Archer found the wreck the day after it happened. He told the sheriff's department he went looking be-

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cause his father no longer went on overnighters. Studying the report's dry wording, McLean found no hint of the distress Mercy claimed her stepson felt.

McLean shrugged it off and concentrated on the photographs he'd spread along the desk's edge. The photos, with the fifty-five-year-old Archer's shriveled remains still in the seat, showed the Blazer from every angle, inside and out. He studied the shots carefully with a small magnifying glass plucked from a shirt pocket.

"Rex Archer have any enemies?"

"Let's just say he didn't have any old friends," Sarah said. "He was a manipulator. Famous for buying minority stakes in small, successful businesses, then grabbing control and milking them dry. It's a rumor he dabbled in commodities, but I don't buy it."

She leaned against the windowsill. "He also speculated in housing, although that implies he took chances, and he decidedly didn't. I've handled a few cases, on the losing end," the pain of defeat gave her voice a sharp edge, "of dreamers he sold property to for a large cash advance and small payments." Disgust lurked behind her violet eyes. "Somehow he usually found a way to foreclose. One house has had five owners in as many years."

"I don't suppose there's a corpse."

"No. In what strikes me as the height of tastelessness, Mercy had the remains cremated last week. The police are satisfied it was an accident."

McLean grunted, stacked the photos, squared the edges, and slid them into the folder. "I'll need copies."

Sarah's normally fluid face aligned itself carefully. "Those are copies. I knew you'd take the case, the Suttons being the underdogs."

He rapped the folder smartly with two fingers. "I might have rooted for the widow."

"But you didn't."

McLean didn't answer. He admired Sarah, and if she hadn't been married, he might have admitted to more.

What he didn't like was her assumption that she could read her sometime fire investigator like a book. It didn't help that so far she had. That it made her a minority of one provided scant comfort.

Sarah looked away uneasily, her sandalwood perfume eddying across the desk on a stray puff of wind from the window. "We don't have much time. Rocky Point's about to cave in, and they've given you three days, tops."

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McLean scooped up the folder and turned for the door. "Don't worry, I'll bail you out." He grinned at Sarah with a confidence he didn't feel as he left.

The pickup's vinyl seat, baking in the autumn sun, hissed when he slid behind the wheel. McLean ignored the sweat running down his back as he jotted questions on the manila folder propped against the steering wheel, absently licking the broken pencil's tip between scribblings. With a disgruntled sigh fueled by low expectations, he turned the pickup's snout toward Copper Valley Auto Wrecking.

Herb Krantz only laughed when McLean asked to see Archer's Blazer. "Hell, it's in Taiwan bein' made into refrigerators by now." He added with a trace of pride, "We work fast here." He waved toward a collection of steering wheels nailed to the office's battered sheet metal walls. "I kept the wheel for my collection, it's that one there." He pointed to a steel skeleton. "Nothing else was worth saving."

McLean ran an exploratory finger around the wheel. "You mean this is it?"

"What I said. Kept it because it's in such good shape, considering he musta hit it pretty hard with his face." He chuckled. "Didn't give much, did it?"

McLean had already noticed. "Any more of these come from Blazers?"

"Yep, at least three." Krantz waved toward a trio of misshapen discs. He spewed a stream of tobacco juice toward the wall, looked at his feet awkwardly, and cleared his throat. "Look, you're an educated man and work for the lawyer lady and stuff, and what with Archer being dead and all, what do you make of this? Damned things arrived yesterday."

Krantz shambled over to a battered desk, pushed a stack of parts books aside, and produced a sheaf of papers from the United States Bankruptcy Court in Medford. He thrust them across the desk almost apologetically.

McLean glanced at them out of politeness, knowing it was small repayment for Krantz's time, even though he knew as much about bankruptcy proceedings as he did about brain surgery. His eyes traveled the sheets while his mind sought the best way to tell Krantz to call a lawyer. Rex Archer's name stood out like a priest at a rock concert.

"Archer was your partner?"

"Yeah." Krantz's tone made it clear his partner's death was an annoyance but no reason to

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mourn, and he accepted McLean's advice to call a lawyer with the same enthusiasm he'd show for a double amputation.

McLean returned the papers and left, almost plowing over another customer as he concentrated on his next stop, the coroner's office. There he skirmished with an indifferent receptionist and a hostile Dr. Thurston Barton.

"Of course it was Archer." Barton, short, round, and as pale as his clients, thumped his government-issue desk. "I know my business, thank you very much, even if I am only part-time." And, McLean thought dryly, a full-time gynecologist, hardly an expert on violent death.

"I wasn't questioning your abilities, doctor." McLean rubbed his nose, which twitched from the formaldehyde-laced air. "It's just that there was no usable identification on the body and it says here," he tapped the insurance file, "that his dental records were destroyed last summer when his dentist's office was vandalized."

Barton rolled his eyes. "There are other ways, you know. For one thing I had enough of the body to make an accurate estimate of the victim's height and build. There were also X-rays of a broken leg, and the breaks matched perfectly. Besides—" Barton's smile chilled the room, "—most of his teeth were gone, burned away."

"Even the rear molars?"

"Yes. The jaw was fractured in the crash."

"I see, hit the steering wheel, did he?"

Barton's exaggerated sigh wafted around the room. "Of course he hit the damned wheel. If you don't mind, the county isn't paying me enough to answer some insurance man's inane questions." He jerked a folder from a stack on his desk and flipped it open.

McLean paused at the door. "Please satisfy a neophyte's curiosity. What color were the bones?"

Barton lifted his head slowly. "White, you blasted ghoul. Pearl white."

The secretary, lip-syncing as she read the *National Enquirer,* lifted her head fractionally and popped her gum at McLean's distracted goodbye.

Moses nudged his visitor in the crotch, then stood motionless, waiting to be petted, a hard demand to resist since the one hundred forty pound Rottweiler wouldn't move until satisfied.

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Axel Reed grinned over one shoulder as he scooted his wheelchair toward a bank of computers. "So there's no confusion—you want these photos blown up, and you want large colored graphics of each one with special emphasis on these spots: the tires, the interior, the roof, and the underside of the engine, right?"

McLean nodded confirmation as he rubbed the dog's ears. Moses closed his eyes and leaned into McLean's legs, confident he'd found a soulmate, which he had, to McLean's surprise. He'd always liked dogs from a distance, but Moses was the first one he'd genuinely admired, probably because of the animal's absolute loyalty to his master. Loyalty being something McLean understood and respected.

Axel studied the photographs before scanning them into his Macintosh. "Grim stuff, but we'll blow things up and see what we get." McLean smiled at his friend's back. If anyone could interpret the pictures it'd be Axel, a colleague from their old fire department in California. They'd been a solid team, until a collapsing roof crushed Axel's back.

He tugged guiltily at the twisted little finger on his left hand. His only injury from a disaster that nearly sent his best friend's life spinning out of control. It was the only time he had appreciated the unexpected wealth dropped into his lap by his mother's death. He bankrolled Axel's new business specializing in computer-enhanced fire scenes, a loan that was almost paid off, and McLean knew better than to forgive the balance, much as he wanted to.

Axel rolled back from the computers, gripped the wheelchair's arms, and lifted himself up, relieving, if only for a moment, the chronic ache of bedsores. McLean grimaced in sympathetic pain. Axel shot his friend a lopsided grin, lowered himself, and pointed to the pictures. "This guy knew a lot more pain. Who was it, anyway?"

When McLean told him, Axel stared possessively around his cramped room. "Bought this house from him." A sly smile warmed his scarred face. "Paid cash up front. Funny guy, if you know what I mean. Married his son's girlfriend." He snorted and pivoted back to the desk. "Typical of the guy. When I was renting, he tried to toss me out because of Moses." He paused, caressed the dog's head, then added without a trace of humor, "Rex Archer had heart surgery last spring, and it's rumored the doctors had trouble finding it."

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McLean pulled away from Axel's house, by itself on the outskirts of town, and headed down Highway 199, past the ever present flock of bearded hitchhikers togged out in surplus army fatigues and hunting jackets. He considered giving one a lift, an older man cradling a small dog, but decided against it since he was only going five miles.

He pulled off the highway several minutes later and dug a map out of the console.

The faded blue-line Forest Service rendering showed every logging road and minor gully in excruciating detail, including the curve, but not the rock, where Rex Archer died.

The fatal spot lay ten miles down a track branching off the road he'd stopped on. The land on either side had been thoroughly logged. No tree thicker than a man's wrist remained standing, and small mountains of branches, bark, and brush waited to be burned in the spring.

McLean, searching for the turnoff, almost rear-ended an army surplus dump truck, outfitted with a water tank and repainted the color of clotted blood, as it wheezed up the road. The water truck took a hard left into a partially hidden clearing just before the secondary road's turnoff. There the logging company would be maintaining a fire watch.

McLean found the turnoff, and his pickup took the twisting washboard track with the grace of a crippled elephant, but it got him the ten miles, where he stopped at the top of a long incline and stared down at the rock. The spot where his truck idled was flat, giving way abruptly to a heavily rutted track that dived for three hundred feet at an angle steeper than a tenement stairway. The entire area was desolate, never having recovered from some heavy-handed logging more than forty years before.

He let the truck roll down the incline, its wheels gripped by the ruts. The truck rocketed straight toward the boulder.

He slid to a stop and reversed fifty feet up the hill, then climbed out and inspected the ground around the rock, taking soil samples from the still blackened area left by the wreck. He then backed up to the flat where he scoured the top and, clucking softly, scraped up more dirt samples.

More out of habit than hope, McLean searched the hilltop in a series of concentric circles. Reaching the edge of the flat, he stared down the side of the hill into a small ravine. He crabbed down the slope, boots

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kicking up puffs of dust left by the abnormally dry autumn.

He walked the ravine, picking up and discarding the odd bits of rusted metal, car parts, and other trash that somehow always find their way to the bottoms of gullies miles from the nearest settlement.

After fifteen minutes his knees began to ache. Half crawling, he worked up the slope toward his truck, using the occasional bush for a handhold. Partway up a loose section of talus gave way and he slipped backwards, flailing for a grip. His slide stopped against a manzanita bush, and he rapped his knuckles on a tire iron dangling in its branches. He started back up the slope, paused, and slid back to the bush, where he examined the tool's unrusted finish. When he scrabbled up the slope again, he was clutching his find in a handkerchief. He stuffed it into the truck's utility box and, whistling softly, started for home.

The dark red tanker's snout caught McLean's attention as his pickup lurched up onto the wider, and marginally smoother, main road. He hopped out of his truck and walked around the tanker toward an aging couple sitting shoulder to shoulder on a sofa sagging beneath an awning nailed to a small yellow house trailer.

"Afternoon, mister." The man, weatherbeaten and thin, sounded cautious but unworried. His round wife said nothing but watched him with a sparkle in her grey eyes. They looked starved for company.

"Good afternoon." McLean squatted on his heels, pleased to have found a greying couple who still enjoyed touching one another. "You folks been on fire watch long?"

"About a month, give or take." The man glanced toward the cutoff to the side road. "You been hunting?"

"No, just looking into an accident that got a man killed."

The couple looked at one another, then back to him. The woman spoke for the first time, her voice motherly. "We wondered if you folks were going to come around."

"We?"

"Yes, aren't you from the sheriff or something?"

McLean tried his most disarming smile. "Something. I'm a fire investigator, just trying to tie up the loose ends. Why were you expecting someone?"

"Well—" the husband sipped from a coffee mug and nodded toward the pot, sitting on a small propane stove. "Want some? No?" He shrugged. "It's just a guy gets hisself killed

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you figure people are gonna check up, you know?"

McLean felt a surge of success. "You saw something that makes you wonder about the accident?"

"Naw, nothing special. Just figured someone would ask is all."

Deflated, McLean pulled off his hat and scratched the ever-widening bald spot where his cowlick used to be. "You see the smoke from the fire?"

"Naw, too far away and on the wrong side of the hill." The man rubbed his chin. "Surprised the other guy didn't see it, though."

"Other guy?"

"Yeah, some guy in a red Bronco went by, oh, I dunno, half an hour after the guy that got killed went by. Took the same road. Another hunter, I figure. Was hard to tell with those stupid damned tinted windows."

"You see the Bronco come back out?"

"Naw, me and the missus," the old man leered and his wife blushed, "we were kinda occupied. Ain't much to do on them high fire danger days when they stop loggin' altogether."

McLean studied the ground between his toes, embarrassed for the woman. He didn't like the old man quite so much. "You're sure you saw the Bronco and the Blazer on the same day?"

Annoyance flickered across the old man's face. "Of course I'm sure, it was the first day of the logging ban, and the damned thing went on for better'n a week. Why we noticed them two cars, they really shouldna been up here."

On his way home, McLean stopped to ship the dirt samples to a friend's laboratory in San Francisco and to pick up his photographs and graphics from Axel Reed.

He spent the next two days working the phone, calling a prickly friend at the sheriff's department, Sergeant Mac Toon; the bankruptcy court in Medford; and Carl Sutton.

On Saturday, the insurance company's deadline day, he called Sarah, then slipped into a cashmere turtleneck, the closest he'd come to wearing a tie, a pair of cotton twill pants, and a deerskin jacket. He dropped the tire iron, lab reports, pictures, and graphics into a large leather briefcase, and went out to the garage, where he stripped the cover off his one prized possession.

The Porsche 928S smoothed out the lumps in Sarah's office parking lot. She climbed in with a quizzical smile. "Bit out of character, aren't we?"

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McLean shot her an enigmatic smile. "The tweed and cashmere set has trouble taking us jeans and Old Spice types seriously."

Sarah, wearing a wool wrap skirt and silk blouse, couldn't be accused of dressing any more stylishly than usual. She twisted around in the contoured leather seat and sniffed. "Actually, I think you wear Tabac. What's the big mystery?"

"It's time we had a discussion with the principals." He stared resolutely ahead as he guided the Porsche out of the lot, then rocketed toward Medford and the Archer villa perched on a bluff overlooking the Rogue Valley. Sarah sat bolt upright, occasionally giving him a hard stare at his refusal to say more.

Trent Archer opened the massive oak door and took his time surveying McLean and Sarah. His eyes once again caressed her chest. McLean gave her a sideways glance.

She smiled at Archer and, in her best Miss America voice, said, "Your fly's open."

He slithered backwards and sideways, his right hand surreptitiously fingering his zipper. His look turned poisonous on finding it closed, and he said in a strangled voice, "This way. Mercy's in the den."

McLean, fighting to keep a straight face, glided after them, automatically casing the house. Not as a burglar, although first-time acquaintances had been known to quietly count their silverware, but as a fireman; checking for smoke alarms and assessing the fire load as well as construction technique. Given the multiple rooms jammed with furniture, the abundance of wooden paneling, the thick carpets and heavy drapes, he decided the house would be an absolute bitch if it caught fire.

Mercy Archer didn't rise from behind a massive rosewood desk that dominated the high-ceilinged room, heavily masculine with its gun racks, glass-eyed trophy heads, and black leather chairs. She motioned abruptly toward two wingbacks directly before the desk. Archer went to the bar, poured two drinks, kept one, and handed the other to Mercy. He leaned against the desk, drawing an irritable glance from his stepmother, which he ignored. He raised his tumbler in a half salute. "So, Rocky Point has come to its senses. We'll just sign the papers and put this incident behind us."

Sarah glanced at McLean with a lifted eyebrow.

"Rocky Point won't be settling out of court," he smiled inwardly at Sarah's sharp intake of breath, "and you'd be foolish to take this before a jury."

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Mercy jumped to her feet and leaned, trembling, on the desktop. "How dare you. Of course they'll pay. They owe me. My husband is dead, and they owe me. They owe me."

Trent Archer tried unsuccessfully to wave his stepmother to her chair. "And just how do you think you can get away with denying us what is rightfully ours? I remind you we have an excellent case, everything is stacked in our favor."

"What you mean is that you need the three million desperately," McLean said calmly.

Mercy looked blank. Trent Archer's drink wobbled dangerously. He set the glass down. "I don't believe I follow you." He avoided looking at his stepmother.

"You should, you're the one who filed the bankruptcy papers for your father the day before his death. He was nearly two million in the hole."

"You're lying," Mercy said quickly. "My husband was a sharp businessman. He would never have allowed that to happen."

"Perhaps not, but someone was playing the commodities market, using his account. You know the one, Mr. Archer, with the brokerage house of Arny & Taub."

With a flash of comprehension, Mercy turned to Trent, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You had power of attorney, from when he had that heart attack."

He returned her stare with undisguised hatred. "Another week was all I needed, I could have been rich. But the broker started getting worried, sold me out. I could've made it. Then you'd see, my father would see. I have what it takes."

Mercy, moving with the speed of a cornered fer-de-lance, struck Trent with an open-handed blow that snapped his head sideways. "You *never* had what it took. And you never will. . . . "

McLean's thick forearm interrupted Trent's lunge for Mercy, who stood her ground. Trent retreated stiff-legged until the back of his knees caught a chair. He dropped into it, spent.

Mercy transferred her contemptuous stare to McLean. "None of this changes our case against Sutton and that retard of his."

"Robbie has Down's Syndrome, he's not a retard," Sarah said coldly.

Mercy flopped into her chair. "It hardly matters what his problem is, he did it and he owes me."

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"Robbie's condition may not matter, but Trent's does." McLean flipped open his briefcase and pulled out the tire iron. Trent, who'd followed his moves listlessly, paled.

"And just what does that have to do with anything?" Mercy asked.

McLean pointed the bar's sharply beveled end at Trent Archer. "He killed your husband with it."

Sarah gasped. "Jesus, P. J."

Archer staggered to his feet, his eyes darting around the room. With a triumphant sneer he aimed a shaking finger at his stepmother. *"No,* she did it."

Mercy jerked a desk drawer open. Her voice rose to a shriek. "You lying little bastard. You've stolen everything from me. Everything."

Even as McLean threw himself across the desk, he knew it was too late. The Colt Python spat with a deafening roar as he wrapped both arms around her flailing body. She pulled the trigger again, nearly kneecapping McLean. Sarah, wielding a lamp, smashed the pistol from her fist. Trent Archer lay doubled up in front of the chair, crying and clutching his stomach.

Sarah's eyes were as hard as the thin strip of Formica table separating them. "I suppose you should be congratulated."

McLean winced, partly from her tone, partly from the pulsating welt where Mercy's bullet had grazed his knee two days before. "Pardon?"

Her strained smile looked reserved for stubborn children or drunken husbands. She knew all about the latter. "Your hearing isn't that bad, P. J. You did your job but it cost me the fright of my life, and Trent Archer a long stay in the hospital."

McLean looked up as the cafe's redhaired waitress set two cups of coffee in front of them. She gave them a curious glance, then retreated to her corner by the kitchen door.

"After talking to Sergeant Toon, I'd say he'll prefer the hospital to his next stop. He's already trying to cut a deal."

"You knew from the beginning something was wrong. Next time I'd appreciate a little warning before the guns go off."

McLean looked away, through the greasy windows and out into the first true storm of the season. He didn't feel as guilty about the outcome as he did about putting Sarah into danger.

He gave her a wan smile. "I apologize. I led you into something I had no right to do. It's

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cost me some sleep, and a little self-respect."

Sarah's mobile face softened, reflecting genuine fondness. "Stop beating yourself. How'd you figure it out?"

McLean leaned back against the hard booth. "If the sheriff had called the fire department—they didn't because the blaze had been out for hours—this wouldn't have gone so far. It was clear from the pictures, at least after they'd been enhanced, that there were several separate fires. A clear sign of arson. There's no point in going into all the details, but two things stood out."

He sipped his coffee gingerly. "There was fire underneath the driver's seat, where they just don't happen by accident. The adjustment mechanism melted, and the seat fell back. The metal discoloration indicated temperatures reached at least sixteen hundred degrees. That's too high for a normal fire. Second, the roof was buckled, which shows that the hottest spot of the fire was in the passenger compartment, and that also points to a flammable liquid."

"How did you know he wasn't carrying an extra can of gas? Hunters do sometimes."

"I checked the police report carefully, and asked Toon about it. They inventoried everything in the Blazer. No gas cans, just a rifle. Not even a sleeping bag. Archer's hunting was confined to one day at a time."

Sarah folded a napkin into squares. "What else?"

A gust of wind followed by a sheet of rain smacked the cafe window. McLean, ordering his thoughts, ignored it. "The coroner said Archer's bones were white. Bone only turns white at crematorium temperatures, close to two thousand degrees. Normally it's kind of a dirty color. Again the temperature was much too high. Legit car fires don't get much over a thousand degrees. And then there were the missing molars."

"You're certainly piling it on."

"Huumph. Well, you wanted the job done right."

Sarah just grinned, but rubbed her cheek on learning that molars are reluctant burners that have to be ground up even at crematoriums.

"Their absence was a clear indication Archer'd been hit in the mouth by something hard. And it wasn't the steering wheel, which hadn't been struck by anything."

"How did you know it was Trent?"

"I didn't. At least not for certain. I did know his car, a red Bronco, had been towed into Sutton's garage the day of the accident, and that he didn't get it back until the next afternoon,

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well after he called the cops, claiming to have found his father's car. Trent told Sutton he couldn't change the tire himself because he'd lost the lug wrench. That it'd bounced out of its holder. Now I can tell you, my Ford is set up the same way, with the wrench under the hood, and that hunk of steel has stayed in place for ten years."

"So Robbie's mistake didn't cause the accident?"

McLean dropped some sugar into his coffee. A rare move. "Robbie didn't make a mistake, at least not this time, but he did provide the idea. I found a large puddle of brake fluid at the top of the hill. The lab confirmed it. There was enough gas in the soil around the wreck to run a lawnmower for a week. Faced with the lab report, Trent admitted bleeding the brakes, refilling the reservoir with power steering fluid, then rolling the car down the hill and torching it. He'd already brained his father. He told Toon the death was an accident, but . . . "

He sighed and looked out the window, then shook his head. "Before you ask, Mercy knew nothing about it. The body was Archer's. At first I had my doubts. It wasn't supposed to be."

"Rex Archer set the whole thing up?"

"Yeah, Archer wanted out of his marriage, and had no intention of splitting fifty-fifty with Mercy. Trent was supposed to troll for a hitchhiker—to provide the corpse—but somewhere along the line he decided he'd had enough of his father. He deeply resented the marriage and saw a perfect way to balance the scales."

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "But Archer was bankrupt."

"Only on paper. Seems Archer, through some very convoluted corporate footwork, owned Arny & Taub. The insurance settlement would have gone to the brokerage. His son, who wasn't quite the spineless fool his father thought, was to pay off the debt, in essence pocketing the money, then join his father in Mexico City."

Sarah pursed her lips. "That doesn't explain why Trent came unglued."

Sourness tinged McLean's laugh. "His father suckered him into the trades in the first place. Trent really did think he was going to hit it big. Rex Archer played his son like a fiddle all of his life, and the strings finally broke."

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Outrage at the Short Mystery Club

by Marty Cann

The catchphrase was, "The solution must be given in exactly one word." Naturally, each member of the Short Mystery Club was furious.

"Impossible!" Wayken cried.

"Deuced difficult," Chaplain grumbled.

Deducto snarled, "What a crazy idea."

"I agree," soothed Dupin, "but those are his terms. Interesting, don't you think?"

Actually, it started with a small classified ad:

If you are over 6'2" and able to present a unique puzzle or mystery to a company of intelligent amateur sleuths, you will be rewarded with an opportunity to match wits with this elite group. Contact us at the box number below.

As intrigued by the height qualification as I was by the challenge, I wasted no time in responding.

Evidently, answers to the advertisement were scarce; in three days I received a brief note requesting that I appear at the address shown on the letterhead for a preliminary interview.

I must confess that I was slightly amused when my interviewer appeared. She was about five feet tall, perhaps a shade under; exquisite as she was tiny. Her name was Dupin, and she did not seem at all uncomfortable about our sixteen inch height differential.

She had only one question. "Why do you think your mystery is so singular that we will have trouble solving it?"

My answer was just as direct. "Because, Ms. Dupin, your solution must be stated in exactly one word."

Dupin seemed startled for a moment but regained her composure quickly. "Fair enough! Please come back to this house in four days.

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You will be guest of honor at the next meeting of the Short Mystery Club."

Only later did I learn the dual nature of the club's name: each mystery was required to be brief in its telling; each member could be no taller than five feet one inch. It was their mission in life to prove that a person's size was no measure of his intelligence. This was a point I have never disputed.

With great anticipation, I appeared as invited. The Short Mystery Club had no president or chairman, no by-laws and no rules of order. Quite simply, the guest stated his mystery or puzzle; the members asked pertinent questions. Each, obviously, was eager to cut the hulking guest down to size by finding the solution as quickly as possible.

I was introduced to each member. They all lived in Hamm, a quaint London suburb located on the River Wry. Charles "Charley" Chaplain, burly, broken-nosed, and hoarse-voiced, was the chief constable of Hamm and, curiously enough, a retired curate; Burt Wayken, CEO of Wayken Security ("We Never Rest"), in direct contradiction to his name was sleepy-eyed, a bit slovenly, and very slow of speech; Dora Dupin, great-great-granddaughter of a renowned French sleuth, was not only a joy to behold but had a wit and intellect that was surely the equal of her famous ancestor; Dr. Deducto (real name unknown) was an ex-music hall entertainer whose mindreading act was the sensation of the telly in the late sixties. His remaining claim to fame was a distinct resemblance to the distinguished but sinister American movie star, Vincent Price.

They were seated on a high dais, and I, of course, was positioned at floor level. I wasted no time in challenging my formidable group of inquisitors.

"I shall give you all a sequence of circumstances, *each word of which is pertinent.* In exactly one word you must give me a *logical* reason for these events. You all may ask any question you desire; my answers will be 'yes,' 'no,' or 'irrelevant.' From time to time I may choose to explain my answer. I shall not try to trick you in any way. Are we agreed?"

With varying degrees of truculence they all concurred, and I presented my facts.

A man entered a pub and asked for a drink. The barmaid took one look at him, reached under the bar, and took out a gun. She pointed

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the gun at the man who, after a startled pause, said, "Thank you," and left the premises.

The interrogation started immediately.

DUPIN: Was the gun real? *(Irrelevant, but for the sake of argument, I'll say yes.)*

CHAPLAIN: Was he about to commit a holdup? *(No.)*

WAYKEN: Was he dressed in an odd way? *(No.)*

DEDUCTO: You're all a bunch of fools. Why not ask the question directly: Did he appear to be a threat to the barmaid? *(No.)*

DUPIN: Have you left something out? *(Yes, the solution.)*

CHAPLAIN: Was his behavior unusual, did he suffer from a disease? *(Yes and no.)*

CHAPLAIN: How can you answer "yes" and "no"? *(You asked two questions; I gave two answers.)*

DUPIN: If the barmaid were a barman, would the same events have occurred? *(Good question! Yes!)*

WAYKEN: Was he unusually tall or short; did his height have anything to do with the story? *(Please—all of you—dismiss your obsession with height; it has nothing to do with this puzzle. The question is irrelevant.)*

DEDUCTO: In the past, I worked extensively with codes. Perhaps we should look for a similar twist. I now ask if your events contain a hidden meaning. *(Dr. Deducto, please wipe that smirk off your face . . . no!)*

At this point, I saw that my questioners were starting to unravel at the seams a bit, and I tried to slow things down by asking for a drink, hoping that they might see some relevance in that. Mr. Chaplain, ex-padre, said somewhat stiffly, "I'm sorry. We all abstain from hard liquor, and there is none here."

I nodded and suggested that we get back to the issue at hand.

DUPIN—smugly—: Thank you for the hint. Obviously, you are trying to tell us that the man was exceedingly drunk. Was the barmaid trying to frighten the man away?

WAYKEN: Pull yourself together, Dupin. Of course the answer will be no. We were told that every word given us was relevant. Why in the world would a drunk wanting a drink say "thank you" to a person pointing a gun at him?

CHAPLAIN: Let me take another stab at it. Is it possible that the man was so hideously deformed that the barmaid could not stand the sight of him? *(Again, you have missed the point. Why would*

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this frightful person say "thank you"?)

Once more my hosts started muttering among themselves. Wayken, Chaplain, and Deducto threw out suggestions and counter-suggestions, each peering suspiciously at me, wondering if this whole thing were a hoax.

Dupin, on the other hand was uncharacteristically quiet. She sat there, eyes closed, head thrown back, nostrils aflare much like a dog on the scent. She twitched her mouth in a tiny smile and said, "I have just three questions . . . "

DUPIN: Did he want a drink of liquor? *(No.)*
Did the bartender know that? *(Yes.)*
Did the gun really frighten him? *(Yes.)*

I knew then that I had lost the battle of wits, or should I say the battle of heights. Rather than give her answer, however, let me ask you, the reader:

Did Dupin's last questions give you the solution? Would it help if I paraphrased a famous British sleuth who said that when faced with an insoluble puzzle, we should throw out all that is impossible; what remains must be possible? Do you know why the man in the bar said, "Thank you"?

It's simple, dear reader. The one word Dupin uttered was

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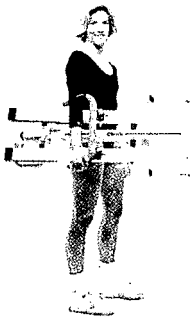


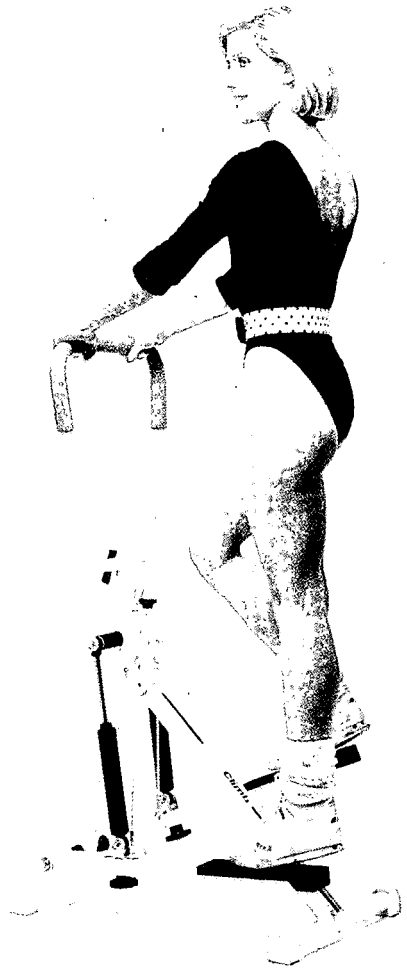
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Mightier Than the Sword

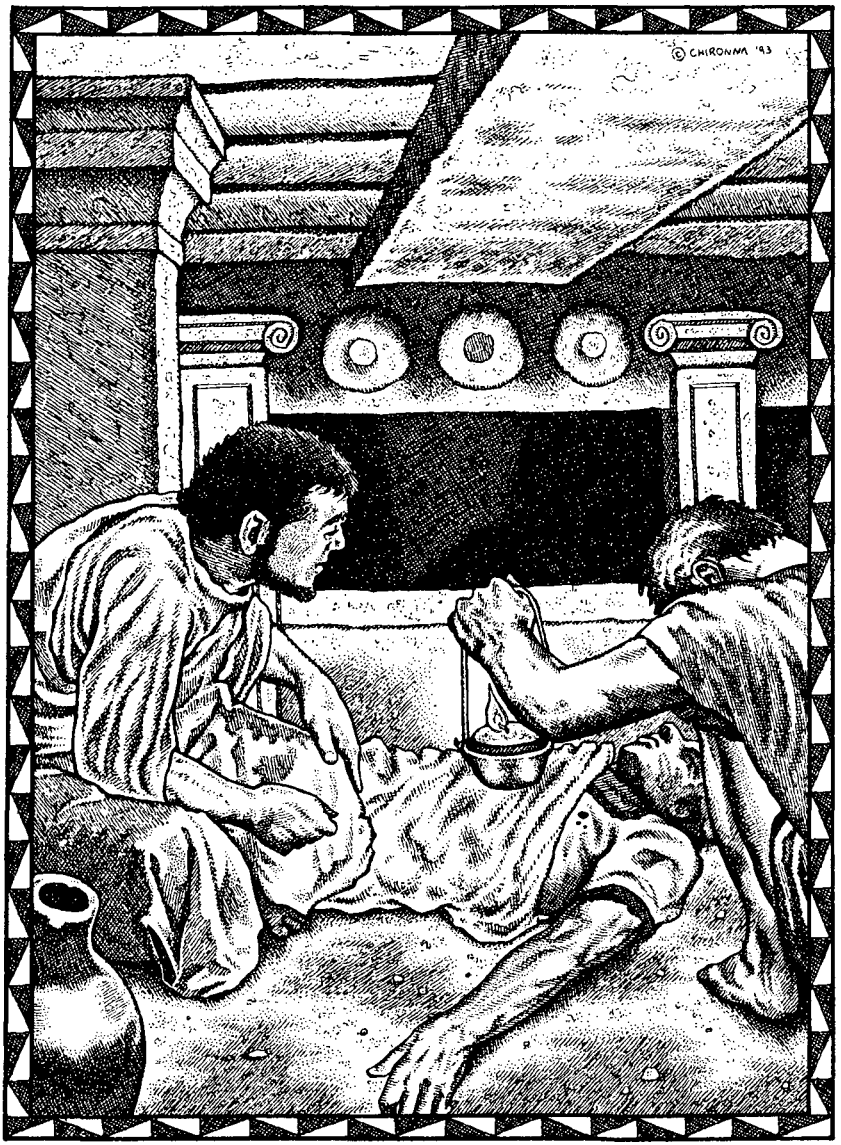
by John Maddox Roberts

The wonderful thing about being aedile is that you get to spend your days poking through every foul, dangerous, rat-infested, pestilential cellar in Rome. Building inspection is part of the job, and you can spend your whole year just prosecuting violations of the building codes, never mind putting on the games and inspecting all the whorehouses, also part of the job. And I'd landed the office in a year when a plebeian couldn't be curule aedile. The curule got to wear a purple border on his toga and sat around the markets all day in a folding chair, attended by a lictor and levying fines for violations of the market laws. No. Marcus Aemilius Lepidus got that job. Well, he never amounted to anything, so there is justice in the world, after all. Mind you, he got to be triumvir some years later, but considering that the other two were Antony and Octavian, he might as well have been something unpleasant adhering to the heel of Octavian's sandal.

And the worst thing was, you didn't have to serve as aedile to stand for higher office. It was just that you had not a prayer of being elected praetor unless, as aedile, you put on splendid games as a gift to the people. If you gave them enough chariot races, and plays and pageants and public feasts and Campanian gladiators by the hundred, then, when you stood for higher office, they would remember you kindly. Of course the state only provided a pittance for these games, so you had to pay for them out of your own pocket, bankrupting yourself and going into debt for years. That was what being aedile meant.

That was why I was in a bad mood when I found the body. It wasn't as if bodies were exactly rare in Rome, especially that year. It was one of the very worst years in the history of the city. The election scandals of the previous year had been so terrible that our two consuls almost weren't allowed to assume office in January, and the year got worse after that. My good friend Titus Annius Milo, poli-

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I SQUATTED BY THE BODY WHILE HERMES
HELD THE LANTERN NEAR THE FACE.

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tician and gang leader, was standing for consul for the next year, as was the equally disreputable Plautius Hypsaeus. Milo's deadly enemy and mine, Publius Clodius Pulcher, was standing for praetor. Their mobs battled each other in the streets day and night, and bodies were as common as dead pigeons in the Temple of Jupiter.

But that was in the streets. Another plebeian aedile, whose name I no longer recall, had charge of keeping the streets clean. I resented finding them in my nice, peaceful if malodorous cellars. And it wasn't in one of the awful, disgusting tenement cellars, either, uninspected for decades and awash with the filth of poverty and lax enforcement of the hygienic laws.

Instead it was in the clean, new basement of a townhouse just built on the Aventine. I was down there inspecting because in Rome honest building contractors are as common as volunteer miners in the Sicilian sulphur pits. My slave Hermes preceded me with a lantern. He was a fine, handsome, strapping young man by this time, and very good at controlling his criminal tendencies. Unlike so many, the basement smelled pleasantly of new-cut timber and the dry, dusty scent of stone from the quarry. There was another, less pleasant smell beneath these, though.

Hermes stopped, a yellow puddle of light around his feet spilling over a shapeless form.

"There's a stiff here, master."

"Oh, splendid. And I thought this was going to be my only agreeable task all day. I don't suppose it's just some old beggar, come down here to get out of the weather and died of natural causes?"

"Not unless there's beggars in the senate these days," Hermes said.

My scalp prickled. There were few things I hated worse than finding a high-ranking corpse. "Well, some of us are poor enough to qualify. Let's see who we have."

I squatted by the body while Hermes held the lantern near the face. Sure enough, the man wore a tunic with a senator's wide purple stripe. He was middle-aged, bald, and beak-nosed, none of which were distinctions of note. And he had had at least one enemy, who had stabbed him neatly through the heart. It was a tiny wound, and only a small amount of blood had emerged to form a palm-sized blot on his tunic, but it had done the job. Three thin streaks of blood made stripes paralleling the one that proclaimed his rank.

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"Do you know him?" Hermes asked.

I shook my head. Despite all the exiles and purges by the censors, there were still more than four hundred senators, and I couldn't very well know all of them.

"Hermes, run to the Curia and fetch Junius, the secretary. He knows every man in the senate by sight. Then inform the praetor Varus. He's holding court in the Basilica Aemilia today, and by this hour he's dying for a break in the routine. Then go find Asklepiodes at the Statilian School."

"But that's across the river!" Hermes protested.

"You need the exercise. Hurry, now. I want Asklepiodes to have a look at him before the libitinarii come to take him to the undertaker's."

He dashed off, leaving the lantern. I continued to study the body, but it told me nothing. I sighed and scratched my head, wishing I had thought to bring along a skin of wine. Not yet half over, and it was one of the worst years of my life. And it had started out with such promise, too. The Big Three were out of Rome for a change: Caesar was gloriously slaughtering barbarians in Gaul, Crassus was doing exactly the opposite in Syria, and Pompey was sulking in Spain while his flunkies tried to harangue the Senate into making him dictator. Their excuse this time was that only a dictator could straighten out the disorder in the city.

It needed the straightening, although making a dictator was a little drastic. My life wasn't worth a lead denarius after dark in my own city. The thought made me nervous, all alone with only a corpse for company. I was so deeply in debt from borrowing to support my office that I couldn't even afford a bodyguard. Milo would have lent me some thugs, but the family wouldn't hear of it. People would think the Metelli were taking the Milo side in the great Clodius-Milo rivalry. Better to lose a Metellus of marginal value than endanger the family's vaunted neutrality.

After an hour or so Varus appeared, escorted by his lictors. Junius was close behind, his stylus tucked behind his ear, accompanied by a slave carrying a satchel full of wax tablets.

"Good afternoon, aedile," Varus said. "So you've found a murder to brighten my day?"

"You didn't happen to bring any wine along, did you?" I said, without much hope.

"You haven't changed any, Metellus. Who do we have?"

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His lictors carried enough torches to light the place like noon in the Forum. The smoke started to get heavy, though.

Junius bent forward. "It's Aulus Cosconius. He doesn't attend the senate more than three or four times a year. Big holdings in the city. This building is one of his, I think. Extensive lands in Tuscia as well." He held out a hand and his slaves opened the leaves of a wooden tablet, the depressions on their inner sides filled with the finest beeswax, and slapped it into the waiting palm. Junius took his stylus from behind his ear and used its spatulate end to scrape off the words scratched on the wax lining. It was an elegant instrument of bronze inlaid with silver, befitting so important a scribe, as the high-grade wax befitted senate business. With a dextrous twirl he reversed it and began to write with the pointed end. "You will wish to make a report to the senate, praetor?"

Varus shrugged. "What's to report? Another dead senator. It's not like a visitation from Olympus, is it?"

Yes, the times were like that.

"I've sent for Asklepiodes," I said. "He may be able to tell something about the condition of the body."

"I doubt he'll be able to come up with much this time," Varus said, "but if you want, I'll appoint you to investigate. Make a note of it, Junius."

"Will you lend me a lictor?" I asked. "I'll need to summon people."

Varus pointed to one of his attendants, and the man sighed. The days of cushy duty in the basilica were over. I said, "Go and inform the family of the late Senator Aulus Cosconius that they have just been bereaved and that they can claim the body here. Junius should be able to tell you where they live. Then go to the contractor who built this place. His name is . . . " I opened one of my own wax tablets " . . . Manius Varro. He has a lumberyard by the Circus Flaminius, next to the Temple of Bellona. Tell him to call on me first thing tomorrow morning, at my office in the Temple of Ceres."

The man handed his torch to a companion and conferred with Junius, then he shouldered his *fasces* and marched importantly away.

Asklepiodes arrived just as Junius and Varus were leaving, trailed by two of his Egyptian slaves who carried his implements and other impedimenta. Hermes was with him, carrying a wineskin. I had trained him well.

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"Ah, Decius," the Greek said, "I can always count upon you to find something interesting for me." He wore a look of bright anticipation. Sometimes I wondered about Asklepiodes.

"Actually, this looks rather squalid, but the man was of some importance and somebody left him in a building I was inspecting. I don't like that sort of thing." Hermes handed me a full cup, and I drained it and handed it back.

Asklepiodes took the lantern and ran the pool of light swiftly over the body, then paused to examine the wound. "He died within the last day, I cannot be more precise than that, from the thrust of a very thin-bladed weapon, its blade triangular in cross-section."

"A woman's dagger?" I asked. Prostitutes frequently concealed such weapons in their hair to protect themselves from violent customers and sometimes to settle disputes with other prostitutes.

"Quite possibly. What's this?" He said something incomprehensible to one of his slaves. The man reached into his voluminous pouch and emerged with a long bronze probe, decorated with little golden acanthus leaves, and a stoppered bottle, rather plain. Asklepiodes took the instrument and pried at the wound. It came away with an ugly little glob of something no bigger than a dried pea. This the Greek poked into the little bottle and restoppered it. He handed the probe and the bottle to the slave, who replaced them in his pouch.

"It looks like dried blood to me," I said.

"Only the surface. I'll take it to my surgery and study it in the morning, when there is light."

"Do you think he was killed somewhere else and dragged down here? That's not much blood for a skewered heart."

"No, with a wound like this most of the bleeding is internal, I believe he died on this spot. His clothing is very little disarranged." He poked at the feet. "See, the heels of his sandals are not scuffed as usually happens when a body is dragged."

I was willing to take his word for it. As physician to the gladiators he had seen every possible wound to the human body, hundreds of times over. He left promising to send me a report the next day.

Minutes later the family arrived, along with the libitinarii to perform the lustrations to purify the body. The dead man's son went through the pantomime of catching his last breath and shouted his name loudly three times. Then the

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undertaker's men lifted the body and carried it away. The women set up an extravagant caterwauling. It wasn't a patch on the howling the professional mourners would raise at the funeral, but in the closed confines of the cellar it was sufficiently loud.

I approached the young man who had performed the final rites. "I am Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger, plebeian aedile. I found your father's body, and I have been appointed investigator by the praetor Varus. Would you come outside with me?"

"Quintus Cosconius," he said, identifying himself, "only son of Aulus." He was a dark, self-possessed young man. He didn't look terribly put out by the old man's passing, not an uncommon attitude in a man who has just found out that he has come into his inheritance. Something about the name ticked at my memory.

"Quintus Cosconius? Aren't you standing for the tribuneship for next year?"

"I'm not alone in that," he said. Indeed he wasn't. Tribune was the office to have in those years. They got to introduce the laws that determined who got what in the big game of empire. Since the office was restricted to plebians, Clodius, a patrician, had gone to the extremity of having himself adopted into a plebeian family just so he could serve as tribune.

"Did your father have enemies? Did any of the feuding demagogues have it in for him?" I was hoping he would implicate Clodius.

"No, in recent years he avoided the senate. He had no stomach for a faction fight." I detected a faint sneer in his words.

"Who did he support?"

"Crassus, when he supported anyone. They had business dealings together." That made sense. Crassus held the largest properties in Rome. If you dealt in real estate, you probably dealt with Crassus.

"I take it you don't support Crassus yourself?"

He shrugged. "It's no secret. When I am tribune, I shall support Pompey. I've been saying that in the Forum since the start of the year. What has this to do with my father's murder?"

"Oh, politics has everything to do with murder these days. The streets are littered with the bodies of those who picked the wrong side in the latest rivalries for office. But since your father was a lukewarm member of the Crassus faction at best, it probably has no bearing upon his death."

"I should think not. What you need to do something about

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is the unchecked and unpunished violence in the city. It strikes me as ludicrous that our senatorial authorities can pacify whole provinces but are helpless to make Rome a safe city." He looked as if a new thought had occurred to him. "Decius Caecilius Metellus the Younger? A friend of Milo's, are you not?" It wasn't the first time that association had been held against me.

"Yes, but like your father's political connections, it has no bearing here. If Milo should prove to be responsible, I shall hale him before the praetor like any other malefactor."

"Rome needs a genuine police force," he said, heatedly. "And laws with teeth."

I was getting tired of this. "When did you last see your father?"

"Yesterday morning. He spoke to me in the Forum. He had been out of the city, touring his country estates—" I saw that look of satisfaction cross his face. They were *his* estates now. "—but he came back to inspect one of his town properties. This one, I think."

"He certainly seems to have ended up here. What plans did he have for this building?

He shrugged again. "The usual, I suppose: let out the ground floor to some well-to-do tenant and the upper floors to the less affluent. He owned many such properties." He smoothed a fold of his exceptionally white toga. "Will there be anything else?"

"Not at present. But I may wish to speak with you again."

"Anything for one on the service of the Senate and People of Rome," he said, none too warmly.

With the crowd gone, I went back to my inspection duties, giving them less than half of my attention. Much as I disliked the man's attitude, Quintus Cosconius had spoken nothing but the truth when he said that Rome needed a police force. Our ancient laws forbade the presence of armed soldiers within the sacred walls, and that extended to any citizen bearing arms in the city. From time to time someone would suggest forming a force of slave-police, on the old Athenian model, but that meant setting slaves in power over citizens and that was unthinkable.

The trouble was that any force of armed men in the city would quickly become a private army for one of the political criminals who plagued the body politic in those days. In earlier times we had done well enough without police because Romans were a mostly law abiding people with a high respect for authority and civic or-

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der. Ever since the Gracchi, though, mob action had become the rule in Rome, and every aspiring politician curried favor with a criminal gang, to do his dirty work in return for protection in the courts.

The Republic was very sick, and despite my fondest hopes, there was to be no cure.

"You've been drinking," Julia said when I got home.

"It's been that sort of day." I told her about the dead senator while we had dinner in the courtyard.

"You have no business investigating while you're in another office," she said. "Varus should appoint a *iudex*."

"It may be years before a Court for Assassins is appointed to look into this year's murders. They're happening by the job lot. But this one occurred in my territory."

"You just like to snoop. And you're hoping to get something on Clodius."

"What will one more murder laid at his doorstep mean? No, for once I doubt that Clodius had anything to do with it." Luckily for me, my Julia was a favorite niece of the great Caius Julius Caesar, darling of the Popular Assemblies. Clodius was Caesar's man and dared not move against me openly, and by this time he considered himself the veritable uncrowned king of Rome, dispensing largesse and commanding his troops in royal fashion. As such, sneaky, covert assassination was supposedly beneath his dignity. Supposedly.

At that time, there were two sorts of men contending for power. The Big Three were all that were left of the lot that had been trying to gain control of the whole empire for decades. Then there were men like Clodius and Milo who just wanted to rule the city itself. Since the great conquerors had to be away from the city for years at a time, all of them had men to look after their interests in Rome. Clodius represented Caesar. Milo had acted for Crassus, although he was also closely tied in with Cicero and the star of Crassus was rapidly fading, to wink out that summer, did we but know it at the time. Plautius Hypsaeus was with the Pompeian faction, and so it went.

"Tell me about it," Julia said, separating an orange into sections. She always believed her woman's intuition could greatly improve upon the performance of my plodding reasoning. Sometimes she was right, although I carefully refrained from telling her so.

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"So you think a prostitute killed him?" she said when she had heard me out.

"I only said that was in keeping with the weapon. I have never known a man to use such a tool to rid himself of an enemy."

"Oh yes. Men like sharp edges and lots of blood."

"Exactly. This little skewer bespeaks a finesse I am reluctant to credit to our forthright cutthroats."

"But if the man owned property all over the city, why take his hired companion to the cellar of an unfurnished house?"

"Good question," I allowed. "Of course, in such matters some men have truly recondite taste. Why, your own Uncle Caius Julius has been known to enjoy . . . "

"Spare me," she said, very clearly considering that her teeth were clamped tightly together.

With my fellow aediles I shared the warren of office space beneath the ancient Temple of Ceres. A man was waiting for me the next morning when I climbed the steps. "Aedile Metellus?" He was a short, bald man, and he wore a worried look that furrowed his brow all the way back to the middle of his scalp. "I am Manius Varro, the builder."

"Ah yes. You recently completed a townhouse property for Aulus Cosconius?"

"I did," he said, still worried. "And I used only the best . . . "

"You will be happy to learn that I found no violations of the code concerning materials or construction."

Relief washed over his face like a wave on a beach. "Oh. It's just about the body, then?" He shook his head ruefully, trying to look concerned. "Poor Aulus Cosconius. I'd done a fair amount of business for him over the years."

"Was there any dispute over your payment?"

He looked surprised that I should ask. "No. He paid in full for that job months ago. He'd been planning to put up a big tenement in the Subura, but he canceled that a few days ago."

"Did he say why?"

"No, just that he didn't want to start anything big with uncertain times ahead. I thought he meant we might have a dictator next year. You never can tell what that might mean."

"Very true," I said, my gaze wandering out over one of Rome's most spectacular views, the eye-stunning expanse of the Circus Maximus stretching out below us. To a native son of Rome, that view is immensely satisfying because it combines three of our passions: races,

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gambling, and enormous, vulgar buildings. His gaze followed mine.

"Ah, aedile, I take it you'll be organizing the races next month?"

"To the great distress of my purse, yes."

"Do you know who's driving in the first race?"

"Victor for the Reds, Androcles for the Greens, Philip for the Blues, and Paris for the Whites." I could have reeled off the names of all sixteen horses they would be driving as well. I was good at that sort of thing.

"You Caecilians are Reds, aren't you?"

"Since Romulus," I told him, knowing what was coming.

"I support the Blues. Fifty sesterces on Philip in the first race, even money?" He undoubtedly knew the names of all the horses as well.

"The Sparrow has a sore forefoot," I said, naming the Reds' near-side trace horse. "Give me three to two."

"Done!" he grinned. We took out the little tablets half the men in Rome carry around to record bets. With our styli we scratched our names and bets in each other's tablets. He walked away whistling, and I felt better, too. Victor had assured me personally that the Sparrow's foot would be fine in plenty of time for the race. I flicked the accumulation of wax from the tip of my stylus, my mind going back to the condition of Cosconius's body.

I had dismissed Varro as a suspect in the murder. Building contractors as a class are swindlers rather than murderers, and his manner was all wrong. But our little bet had set me on a promising mental trail. My borrowed lictor was sitting on the base of the statue of Proserpina that stood in front of the temple before the restorations commissioned by Macaenas. He looked bored senseless. I summoned him.

"Let's go to the Forum." At that he brightened. Everything really interesting was happening in the Forum. In the Forum, lictors were respected as symbols of *imperium*. With him preceding me, we went down the hill and across the old Cattle Market and along the Tuscan Street to the Forum.

The place was thronged, as usual. It held an aura of barely-contained menace in that unruly year, but people still respected the symbol of the *fasces* and made way for the lictor. I made a slow circuit of the area, finding out who was there and, more important, who was not. To my great relief, neither Clodius nor Milo was around with their crowds of thugs. Among the candidates for the

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next year's offices I saw the young Quintus Cosconius. Unlike the others standing for the tribuneship in their specially whitened togas, he wore a dingy brown toga, and he had not shaved his face nor combed his hair, all in token of mourning.

On the steps of the Basilica Opimia I found Cicero, surrounded as always by clients and friends. Ordinarily I would have waited upon his notice like everyone else, but my office and my lictor allowed me to approach him at once.

"Good morning, aedile," he saluted, always punctilious in matters of office. He raised an eyebrow at sight of my lictor. "Does your office now carry *imperium?* I must have dozed off during the last senate meeting."

"Good morning, Marcus Tullius, and no, I'm just carrying out an investigation for Varus. I would greatly appreciate your advice."

"Of course." We made that little halfturn that proclaimed that we were now in private conference, and the others directed their attention elsewhere. "Is it the murder of Aulus Cosconius? Shocking business."

"Exactly. What were the man's political leanings, if any?"

"He was a dreadfully old fashioned man, the sort who opposes almost anything unsanctioned by our remote ancestors. Like most of the men involved in city property trade, he supported Crassus. Before he left for Syria, Crassus told them all to fight Pompey's efforts to become dictator. That's good advice, even coming from Crassus. I've spent months trying to convince the tribunes not to introduce legislation to that effect."

"What about next year's tribunes?" I asked.

"Next year's? I'm having trouble enough with the ones we have now."

"Even if Pompey isn't named dictator, he's almost sure to be one of next year's consuls. If the tribunes for next year are all Pompey's men, he'll have near-dictatorial authority and the proconsular province of his choosing. He'll be able to take Syria from Crassus, or Gaul from Caesar, if he wants."

Cicero nodded. "That has always been Pompey's style—let someone else do all the fighting, then get the tribunes to give him command in time for the kill." Now he looked sharply at me. "What are you getting at, Decius?"

"Be patient with me, Marcus Tullius. I have . . . " at that moment I saw a slave, one of

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Asklepiodes' silent Egyptian assistants, making his way toward me, holding a folded piece of papyrus which he handed to me. I opened up the papyrus, read the single word it contained and grinned. "Marcus Tullius," I said, "if a man were standing for public office and were caught in some offense against the ancient laws—say, he carried arms within the boundaries set by Romulus—would it abnegate his candidacy?" My own solution to the law was to carry a *caestus*. The spiked boxing glove was, technically, sports equipment rather than a proper weapon.

"It's a commonly violated custom in these evil times, but if I were standing for office against that man, I would prosecute him and tie him up in litigation so thoroughly that he would never take office."

"That is just what I needed to know. Marcus Tullius, if I might impose upon you further, could you meet with me this afternoon at the *ludus* of Statilius Taurus?"

Now he was thoroughly mystified, something I seldom managed to do to Cicero. "Well, my friend Balbus has been writing me from Africa for months to help him arrange the games he will be giving when he returns. I could take care of that at the same time."

"Thank you, Marcus Tullius." I started to turn away.

"And, Decius?"

I turned back. "Yes?"

"Do be entertaining. That's a long walk."

"I promise it."

At the bottom of the steps I took the tablet thonged to the slave's belt and wrote on the wax with my stylus. "Take this to your master." I instructed. He nodded wordlessly and left. Asklepiodes' slaves could speak, but only in Egyptian, which in Rome was the same thing as being mute. Then I gave the lictor his orders.

"Go to Quintus Cosconius, the man in mourning dress over there with the candidates, and tell him that he is summoned to confer with me at the Statilian School in—" I glanced up at the angle of the sun "—three hours."

He ran off, and I climbed the lower slope of the Capitoline along the Via Sacra to the Archive. I spoke with Calpurnius, the freedman in charge of estate titles, and he brought me a great stack of tablets and scrolls, bulky with thick waxen seals, recording the deeds of the late Aulus Cosconius. The one for the Aventine townhouse where I had discovered his body was a nice little wooden diptych with bronze hinges. Inside, one leaf bore writing done

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with a reed pen in black ink. The other had a circular recess that held the wax seal, protecting it from damage.

"I'll just take this with me if you don't mind," I said.

"But I *do* mind," Calpurnius said, "You have no subpoena from a praetor demanding documents from this office." One always has to deal with such persons, on public duty. After much wrangling and talking with his superiors and swearing of sacred oaths upon the altars of the state, I got away with the wretched document, to be returned the next morning or forfeit my life.

Thus armed, I made my leisurely way toward the river and crossed the Aemilian Bridge into the Trans-Tiber district. There, among the river port facilities of Rome's newest district, was the *ludus* of Statilius Taurus, where the best gladiators outside of Campania were trained. I conferred with Statilius for an hour or so, making arrangements for the games that had already bankrupted me. Then Cicero arrived to do the same on behalf of his friend Balbus. He was accompanied by five or six clients, all men of distinction in their own right.

With our business concluded, we went out to the gallery that overlooked the training yard. It was an hour when only the fighters of the first rank were working out, while the tyros watched from the periphery. These men despised practice weapons, preferring to train with sharp steel. Their steel was amazing to see. Even Cicero, who had little liking for the public shows, was impressed.

Asklepiodes arrived as we were thus engaged, holding a folded garment. "This is the oddest task you have ever asked of me," he said, "but you always furnish amusement of the highest sort, so I expect to be amply rewarded." He handed me the thing.

"Excellent!" I said. "I was afraid the undertaker might have thrown it away."

"Aedile," Cicero said a bit testily. "I do hope this is leading somewhere. My time is not without value."

I saw a man in a dark toga come through the archway leading to the practice yard. "I promise not to disappoint you. Here's my man now."

Young Cosconius looked around, then saw me gesturing from the distinguished group on the gallery. He came up the stair, very stiff and dignified. He was surprised to see Cicero and his entourage, but he masked his perplexity with an expression of *gravitas* befitting one recently bereaved and

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seeking high office. He saluted Cicero, ex-consul and the most important man currently residing in Rome.

"I am here on a matter of business," Cicero said. "I believe your business is with the aedile."

"I apologize for summoning you here," I said. "I know that you must be preoccupied with your late father's obsequies." When I had last seen him, he had been busy grubbing votes.

"I trust you've made progress in finding my father's murderer," he said coldly.

"I believe I have." I looked out over the men training in the yard below. "It's a chore, arranging for public games. You'll find that out. I suppose you'll be exhibiting funeral games for your father?"

He shrugged. "He specified none in his will, which was read this morning. But I may do so when I hold the aedileship."

Confident little bastard, I thought. I pointed to a pair of men who were contending with sword and shield. One carried the big oblong legionary shield and *gladius,* the other a small round shield and curved shortsword.

"That's Celadus with the Thracian weapons," I said, referring to the latter. "Do you support the Big Shields or the Small Shields?"

"The Big Shields," he said.

"I've always like the Small Shields," I told him. "Celadus fights Petraites from the School of Ampliatus at next month's games." Petraites was a ranking Big Shield fighter of the time. I saw that special gleam come into his eye.

"Are you proposing a wager?"

"A hundred on Celadus, even money?" This was more than reasonable. Petraites had the greater reputation.

"Done," he said, taking out his tablet and stylus, handing the tablet to me. I gave him mine, then rummaged around in my tunic and toga.

"I've lost my stylus. Would you lend me yours?"

He handed it over. "Now, I believe you called me here concerning my father's murder."

"Oh yes, I was coming to that. Quintus Cosconius, I charge you with the murder of your father, Senator Aulus Cosconius."

"You are insane!" he said, his dark face going suddenly pale, as well it might. Of the many cruel punishments on our law books, the one for parricide is one of the worst.

"That is a serious charge, aedile," Cicero said. "Worse than

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poisoning, worse than treason, even worse than arson."

Cosconius pointed a finger at me. "Maybe you aren't mad. You are just covering up for another of your friend Milo's crimes."

"Asklepiodes pronounced that death was the result of a wound inflicted by a thin blade piercing the heart. He found a bit of foreign substance adhering to the wound, which he took to his surgery to study. I thought at first that the weapon was a bodkin such as prostitutes sometimes carry, but this morning it occurred to me that a writing stylus would serve as well, provided it was made of bronze." I held up the piece of paper Asklepiodes had sent me with its one word: "wax."

"This confirms it. Aulus Cosconius was stabbed through the heart with a stylus uncleaned by its owner since its last use. A bit of wax still adhered to its tip and was left on the wound."

Quintus Cosconius snorted. "What of it? Nearly every literate man in Rome carries a stylus."

"Actually, I didn't really forget my own stylus today." I took it out. "You see, the common styli are round or quadrangular. Mine, for instance, is slightly oval in cross-section." Cicero and his friends drew out their own implements and showed them. All were as I had described. Cicero's was made of ivory, with a silver scraper.

"Yet Asklepiodes' examination indicated that the weapon used to kill Aulus Cosconius was triangular. You will note that young Quintus's implement is of that geometrical form, which is most rare among styli." I handed it to Cicero.

Then I shook out the tunic the dead man had been wearing. "Note the three parallel streaks of blood. That is where he wiped off the sides of the stylus."

"A coward's weapon," snorted one of Cicero's companions.

"Young Cosconius here is standing for office," I pointed out. "He couldn't afford to be caught bearing arms within the *pomerium*. But most Romans pack a stylus around. It isn't much of a weapon, but no one is going to survive having one thrust through his heart."

"Why would I do such a thing?" Cosconius demanded. You could smell the fear coming off him.

"Yesterday," I said, "you told me you didn't know what use your father intended for that townhouse. Here is the deed from the Archive." I took the diptych from a fold of my toga and opened it. "And here he

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states plainly that it is 'to serve as a residence for his only surviving son, Quintus.' He didn't bother showing you this deed or getting your seal on it because he was a very old fashioned man, and by the ancient law of *partria potestas* you were a minor and could not legally own property while your father was alive. He took you to show you your new digs, and that is where you argued and you killed him."

Everyone glared at Cosconius, but by this time he had gained enough wisdom to keep his mouth shut.

"Killed the old man for his inheritance, did he?" Cicero said grimly.

I shook my head. "No, nobody gets killed over money these days. It's always politics. Aulus Cosconius was generous enough with his wealth, else why give his son a whole townhouse to himself? But he supported Crassus, and Quintus here is Pompey's man. Aulus wouldn't stick his neck out for Crassus, but he could keep Pompey from getting another tame tribune without risk, or so he thought."

I addressed Cosconius directly. "Sometime during the tour of that townhouse he told you that he forbade you to stand for tribune. As *pater familias* it was his legal right to do so. Or perhaps he had told you before, and you waited until you were together in a lonely spot to kill him. The law admits of no distinction in such a case."

Cosconius started to get hold of himself, but Cicero deflated him instantly. "I shall prosecute personally, unless you wish to, Decius Caecilius."

"I shall be far too busy for the balance of this year."

Cosconius knew then he was a dead man. Cicero was the greatest prosecutor in the history of Roman jurisprudence, which was precisely why I had asked him there in the first place. He took few cases in those days, but a parricide in a senatorial family would be the splashiest trial of the year.

I summoned the owner of the school. "Statilius, lend me a few of your boys to escort this man to the basilica. I don't want him jumping into the river too soon."

Cosconius came out of his stupor. "Gladiators? You can't let scum like that lay hands on a free man!"

"You'll have worse company soon," Cicero promised him. Then, to me: "Aedile, do your duty."

I nodded to my borrowed lictor. He walked up behind Quintus Cosconius and clapped a hand on his shoulder, inton-

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ing the old formula: "Come with me to the praetor."

That's the good part about being aedile: you get to arrest people.

These were the events of two days in the year 703 of the City of Rome, the consulship of Marcus Valerius Mesalla Rufus and Cnaeus Domitius Calvinus.

(continued from page 4)

his on movie trivia for a weekly Long Island paper. He has been an advertising space sales manager, an architectural rep, an overhead door estimator, a print shop owner, and a Long Island Railroad brakeman. A New Yorker who currently lives in Maryland, he has traveled extensively and is an "avid, but terrible, golfer."

Angela Zeman is the former owner of a business-to-business ad agency in New Jersey. She has also "been a makeup artist, carried newspapers on a rural route, sold mailing machines, run sales seminars for brokers," and has had a hand in a number of other jobs. "I hold a Dive Master rating in S.C.U.B.A. diving; I won a trophy for trap shooting. . . . I used to love cooking but find I'm turning less domestic the older I get."

Gene KoKayKo, author of "Late September Dogs," tells us that he "held many jobs while raising a family and trying to write, from dishwasher to dance instructor to baker to sales rep." He has published a number of short stories in the fields of espionage, horror, science fiction, and Westerns.

Jan Burke, author of "Why Tonight?," is also the author of (to date) two mystery novels; the second one will be published next year. A number of people have found the opening sentence of her first book, *Goodnight, Irene,* particularly arresting. She tells us that she began writing the book "after the first line came to me. My husband and I were watching a friend's band play in an L.A. dive. The line: He loved to watch fat women dance."

Before taking up writing, Ms. Burke "went to work in our family business, making the cutting teeth for oil well and mining drill bits from tungsten carbide. The company was sold to Dresser Industries, and I have been the only woman plant manager in my division. . . . I'm probably the only woman plant manager in the carbide industry."

Ms. Burke recently resigned her job to spend all her time writing. One reader for sure is President Clinton, who told *48 Hours* last March that he was reading *Goodnight, Irene.*

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Why Tonight?

by Jan Burke

Why tonight?

As she lay staring up at the lazily circling blades of the ceiling fan, Kaylie asked herself the question again and again. She wasn't sure what caused her to ask herself that question more than any other, especially as there were certainly other matters that she should be addressing before the sheriff arrived. But through the numbness that surrounded nearly every other line of thinking, one question occurred to her repeatedly, refused evasion by tricks of distraction: why tonight?

Was it because of the heat? It was hot tonight. But then, it wasn't the first hot summer night in Kansas. Even her grandmother used to say that the devil couldn't be found in Kansas in August; in August he went back to hell, where he could cool off. No, the heat had not decided this night would be the night that Joseph Darren died.

She had met the man whose body hung from a rope tied to the rafters of the garage on another, long-ago August night, when she had gone down to the small man-made lake on the edge of town, hoping it would be cool there.

She had talked Tommy Macon into driving her down there that night. She smiled, thinking of Tommy. Tommy who used to have a crush on her. Tommy, taking her out to drag Main in his big old Chrysler. Kaylie calling "Hey!" to Sue Halloran, just to rub it in. Sue calling back, half-heartedly, like a beaten pup.

Willowy. That's what Joseph called her that night. If his eyes had moved over her just a little more slowly, it would have been insulting. He had taken in her skinny frame, a body she dismissed with the word "awkward" up to that moment, that moment when Joseph asked, "Who's the willowy blonde, Tommy?"

When he introduced them, Tommy, who would never be a Thomas, whispered to her, "Don't never call him Joe." He needn't have bothered with the warning. She knew from that first moment that Joseph would be extraordinary. He would never be "an average Joe." Tommy was sweet and clumsy, but she was too stupid in

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those days to see the advantages of being with a sweet and clumsy man.

She sighed, closing her eyes. Too late to mourn the loss of Tommy, still married to Sue. Five kids and fifty pounds later, he would stay married to her. Kaylie couldn't even bring herself to contemplate the idea of mourning Joe. She tried it. Not mourning him—calling him Joe.

Joe. Joe. Joe. She said it like a curse. *Joe you.* It suited him now, she decided.

He was a poet, he had told her, when he was Joseph. A poet. Tommy confirmed it. Tommy, naively bragging about a man he hadn't even realized was already his rival. Joseph's poetry had been in every issue of the *Butler County College Literary Magazine* every semester he had been there. Tommy didn't claim to understand it all, but he thought it was pretty interesting that Joseph used all small letters, like that Ogden Nash—no, hell, no, that e. e. cummings fellow. That, and did Kaylie know that Joseph could recite all the words to "American Pie" and tell her exactly what they all meant?

Joseph never did recite "American Pie" for her or unravel its meaning. Too late now.

Kaylie shifted to her side, looking out the top half of the bedroom window. The broken air conditioner sat in the bottom half. It made her mad just to see that air conditioner, so she forced herself to look up over the top of it.

The refinery was still burning. Flames, in the distance, reflected odd colors off the clouds of smoke that billowed and rolled into the night sky. Even with the wind blowing most of it away from town, the air was filled with the stench of burning oil and gas, and would doubtless be for some hours.

Maybe it was the fire. Was that why Joseph had died this night, and not some other night? Had the stinking, burning oil made the sky so different tonight, so different that things had come to this?

She turned away from the window, restless, unwilling to watch it, knowing neighbors had died there tonight. No time to think of that, not now.

Damn, it was hot.

She wondered if Joseph's students would miss him. He had always managed to have a coterie of A.Y.M.'s around him. That was one of Kaylie's secrets, calling them that. An A.Y.M. was an Adoring Young Miss, and many of them had fastened their hungry,

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barely-lost-my-innocence gazes on Professor Joseph Darren.

And why not? He could have been a made-for-TV English professor. He taught poetry, was a *published* poet (mostly through a small local press owned by a childhood friend). All those A.Y.M.'s thought he was *so sensitive*. (Their own boyfriends were sweet but clumsy, and *so immature,* i.e., not twenty years their senior like Professor Darren.) He was handsome and tall and distinguished looking, with an air of vulnerability about him. Slender but not gaunt. Big, dark, brooding eyes. Long legs. Long lashes. Long, beautiful fingers.

His fingers. Only one of Joseph's poems had been published in the *American Poetry Review*, and it was Kaylie's favorite. For some years now, it had been the only one she could stand to read. It was a poem about something that had really happened. It was a poem about the time he righted a fallen chair, the chair beneath his mother's dangling feet, and stood upon it, then reached up and placed the fingers of one hand gently around her ribs, and pulled her to him, holding her until he could use the fingers of the other hand to free the rope from her neck.

He had shown the poem to Kaylie not long after they met, and told her that his mother had committed suicide one hot summer day. Kaylie could see at once that he was a troubled man who needed her love to overcome this tragedy. Thinking of that poem now, she held her own strong hands out before her. Had she taken him that seriously then? Well, yes, at eighteen, the world was a very serious place. At forty, it was serious again.

But the poem had genuinely moved her, and after they were married, she had sent it off to the *Review*. Joseph had been unhappy with her for sending it in, told her she had no business doing so without his permission, and he was probably right. But in the end, it had been that poem in the *Review* that got him the teaching job.

Joseph's talk of his travels around the world had pulled at her imagination. He had traveled a great deal after his mother died. His father had passed away the summer before, and there was an inheritance from that side of the family that he came into upon his mother's death. Joseph told her of places he had been, of Europe and North Africa and India. She had pictured the two of them traveling everywhere: riding camels on the way to the pyramids, backpacking to Machu Picchu.

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But after they married, he didn't want to go anywhere. He had satisfied his wanderlust, it seemed. When she complained about it, he gave her a long lecture about how immature it was of her to want to trot all over the globe, to be the Ugly American *turista*. Those other people didn't want us in their countries, he told her. Besides, he couldn't travel: he had to get through graduate school.

So she washed his clothes and darned his socks and typed his papers instead of riding camels. One of her friends was almost a feminist and told her she shouldn't do things like that for him. But her almost-feminist friend was divorced not long after that and, as Joseph asked Kaylie when he heard of it, *didn't that tell her something?* Soon she stopped having anything to do with the woman because Joseph told Kaylie that the woman had been coming on to him. Now she wondered if it was true.

There had been years of small deceptions, she knew. He had seemed so honest in the beginning. She had misunderstood the difference between baldly stating facts and being honest. On the night he told her about his mother, he also told her about his daughter, Lillian. He said he loved Lilly, but he didn't marry Lilly's mother exactly because she had tried to trick him into marrying her by getting pregnant. He might as well have said, *"Let that be a lesson to you."*

When he finished graduate school, Joseph told Kaylie that he had decided against having any more children. He had a vasectomy not long after he made that announcement. She was twenty-one then and didn't object very strongly; it was a disappointment, but she could understand Joseph's point of view. She told herself that they would have more time to do the things they wanted to do. And even every other weekend, Lilly was a handful.

But somewhere around thirty-five, it became more than a disappointment. It was a bruise that wouldn't heal. Every time her mind touched upon it, it hurt.

By then, their isolation was nearly complete. They were estranged from her family and most of the people she knew before her marriage. Their few friends were his friends; their hobbies, his hobbies; their goals, his goals. He reserved certain pleasures for his own enjoyment. Infidelity was one of them.

Her own private pleasures were far less complicated. Four years ago, she had planted a garden, perhaps needing to give life to *something*. Joseph never liked what she chose to plant there, but otherwise, he ignored it.

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Jim Lawrence, on the other hand, had liked the garden. One day when he was driving his patrol car past the house, he had seen her trying to lug a big bag of fertilizer to the back yard. He had stopped the car and helped her. When he saw the garden, he smiled and said, "Well, Kaylie, I see Professor Darren hasn't taken all of the farmer out of you yet." He spent time talking with her about what she had planted, complimenting her without flattery.

For a while after he had left that afternoon, she felt a sense of loss. But as she continued to work in the garden, that passed, and she began to replay mentally those few moments with Jim Lawrence again and again. She began to think of them as a sort of infidelity. She took pleasure in that notion.

That brief, never repeated encounter made the garden all the more valuable to her. She had spent a long time in the garden late this afternoon, watering it, trying to protect it from the heat. She had gone out to it again in the early evening, after supper but before the summer sun was down, letting its colors and fragrances ease her mind, cutting flowers for her table.

Jim Lawrence parked the patrol car next to the curb in front of the Darren house, allowing himself the luxury of a sigh as he pocketed the keys. This had been one helluva night, the worst he had faced since becoming a sheriff's deputy, and it was far from over. He had been glad to let the high muckety-mucks take over at the refinery. He had no desire to try to juggle the demand of firefighters, OSHA, oil company men, and every kind of law enforcement yahoo between here and God's forgiveness. Let the sheriff handle it himself.

The task he had been given that night was bad enough. He had spent the last four hours getting in touch with families who lived outside of town, out on farms, and bringing someone from each family to the temporary morgue at the junior high school. Mothers, fathers, wives, husbands—brought them into town to help identify the bodies. ("No, Mrs. Reardon, he wasn't fighting anybody. His fists are up because . . . well, that's just what happens to the muscles in a fire." How could you say *that* gently?) All some could do was give needed information ("Who was his dentist, Mr. Abbot?") to the harried coroners.

Emma, the woman who worked dispatch, did her best, but she was fairly new on the job and ill-prepared for a disaster of this magnitude. In the midst of the chaos that came with the refinery

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fire, she had managed to log a call from Kaylie Darren, asking Jim to come by, no matter how late, whenever he had a minute. It was important that he come by, but it could wait.

Emma hadn't managed to find out what Mrs. Darren had wanted. He tried to guess, figured she must be having problems with her neighbors. Maybe the Hansons' teenage sons had been causing her some trouble. They had been knocking over mailboxes, setting off firecrackers, and making general nuisances of themselves this summer. Hormones and heat. Bad combination.

Still, Kaylie wasn't the type to complain about such things. He had known her back before she was Mrs. Darren. Kaylie Lindstrom. They went to high school together. She was blonde, blue-eyed, skinny. Just starting to fill out some when Joseph Darren had nabbed her. Have to give the son of a bitch that much—he had foresight then.

Jim mused over all he knew of Joseph Darren. Mother was a suicide. He had lived in Wichita for a while, got a girl pregnant. He gave his daughter his name, but never married her mother. Had the daughter with them every other weekend. Of course, that was when she was little. Daughter was grown by now. Hell, she must be—what, twenty-two? Older than most of the students Joseph Darren was rumored to be sleeping with. Jim remembered hearing that the daughter was married not long ago. Maybe she did better for herself than Kaylie did.

He thought of the day Kaylie had shown him the garden. He thought she had seemed starved for attention, and he had meant to go by again sometime. But maybe *because* she seemed starved for attention, he had hesitated to do so.

He got out of the patrol car and walked wearily toward the house, wondering if Kaylie knew her garage light was on.

She met him at the door, opened it, and beckoned him inside before he could knock. Must have been watching for the patrol car. He stood in the front hallway, studying her for a moment. She looked good, slender and fit, but she was tense and talking too fast. Asked him to come in, thanked him for coming over, said she knew that he probably had his hands full what with the fire and all and . . . and trailed off, apparently not able to say whatever it was she had to say. His weariness left him then. He realized that something very serious was going on; she hadn't called to complain about the Hanson kids or anything like that. He already knew he wasn't going to like it.

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He had seen this before, when a person had something they wanted to tell him but couldn't lay his or her hands on the starting thread of the story. He would make the first tug, so that she could begin the unraveling.

"Emma was a little flustered tonight, Kaylie. She didn't tell me what it was you needed to see me about."

"No, I—I guess I forgot to tell her."

Tug or wait? He waited. She was looking up at him now, searching his face. Goddamn, it was hot in this house. What was she looking for?

"Kaylie?"

"Joseph's dead."

Wait. Keep waiting, he told himself.

"He's in the garage."

"Why don't you show me, Kaylie?"

She nodded. He followed her into the kitchen, to the door leading to the garage. When she opened it, there was another blast of heat, and as he entered the garage, he realized that the clothes dryer was on. But that distracted him only for a moment.

Jim saw the feet first. The shoes, black leather shoes; dark gray socks; sharply-creased gray pants, stained; fingers curving, hands limp at his sides; longsleeved white shirt (stray thought: must have been hot, wearing that thing on a day like today); red tie, collar, rope; head bent forward, eyes open and staring down; rope continuing to rafters. One straight, still line of lifelessness. Ladder not far away. All baldly illuminated from overhead by a single light bulb in a white ceramic socket.

Behind him, Jim heard the rhythmic hum and whisper of the dryer.

In front of him, Kaylie swayed a little, and he caught her to him, letting her bury her face on his shoulder. She didn't cry, she didn't even put her arms around him, just leaned into him. He held on to her.

Joseph Darren's lifeless eyes continued to stare down. Jim stared back.

You son of a bitch. Just like your mother. Wasn't that enough to teach you what this would be like for Kaylie, coming in here to find you like this?

"Let's go back into the house," he said.

She looked up at him. Didn't say anything, didn't move. Kept watching his eyes. What was she looking for?

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"Shouldn't we cut him down?" she asked.

"No, I'm sorry, we can't. With this fire, well, I'm afraid we'll have to wait a while before I can get a crime team out here."

"A crime team?"

"An investigator, a criminalist, whoever else they want to call in. And a coroner. A suicide is a reportable death. I'm sorry, Kaylie; it's the way I have to handle it. Let's go inside."

She let him lead her back into the kitchen. He closed the door to the garage and felt her relax a little as it clicked shut. The kitchen was bright and gleaming, its white-tiled counters scrubbed, the white linoleum shining. The second hand on a round, plain-faced, battery-operated clock ticked away the time with small, jerking movements. On a dish drainer below it, two plain white dishes, a wineglass, and two sets of silverware were drying. On the kitchen table, a red vase held a wild assortment of summer blossoms, mostly roses.

"From your garden?" he asked.

"Yes, I brought them in today. Can I get you something cold to drink?"

"Thanks, that would be nice. I'll be back in a minute."

"You're leaving?"

Looking at her troubled face, he felt another surge of anger toward the man in the garage. Hell, and he hadn't done so well by her himself; left her waiting around with her husband's corpse for several hours.

"Just for a minute. I'm just going to go out to the car; I'll be right back. You'll be all right?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

Hot as it was outside, it was actually cooler than in the house. The stench from the fire was all that kept him from asking Kaylie to talk to him on the porch. He called in on his radio; Emma, who was feeling guilty about not taking a better message from Kaylie, called him back and told him that she had tried to get the county people to cooperate, but it would be at least an hour before they could get anyone out to him. He gathered up his clipboard and forms.

On his way back to the house, he noticed the air conditioner in the bedroom window. He wondered why she wasn't using it.

They sat at the table, drinking lemonade, both silent for a time. He decided he would get the business end of all this over and done

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with so he could spend the rest of the time he waited with her as a friend, not an officer of the law.

"I need to ask you a few questions, Kaylie."

She nodded. "Go ahead. It's all right, Jim."

She was tense again, he could see. He didn't want to make this any harder on her than it already was. Slowly, he told himself: Take it slow and easy. "Did your husband go to work out at the college today?"

"Yes. He was at the college most of the day. He has a full schedule for summer session. I'm not sure exactly when he got home—I was working in the garden this afternoon. But I heard the phone ring and came in to answer it; Joseph had already picked it up. That was about five o'clock, and it looked like he had just walked in not too long before that."

"He was dressed like he is now?"

"Yes, that's what he had on. I think Lillian called before he had a chance to change."

"Lillian? His daughter?"

"Yes. He talked to her. I—I know there's never any one reason for these things, but the call seemed to upset him."

"Why?"

She looked away. "I shouldn't have said that. It's my fault, not Lillian's. I don't think I ever made him very happy."

"Kaylie."

She looked back at him.

"Don't do that to yourself. Please."

She said nothing for a moment, then sighed. "You're right, of course."

"Tell me about the phone call."

"Lillian called to say she was pregnant."

"That upset him?"

"I know it sounds foolish, but you have to understand Joseph. He was so afraid of growing old. That's why he had those affairs with his students."

He looked at her in surprise.

"Yes, I knew about them. It's a small town, Jim. I got 'Dear Abby' clippings in the mail whenever she ran a column on cheating husbands. Or some anonymous 'friend' would call and tell me that she had seen Joseph going into a motel outside of town."

"Good Lord."

"It doesn't matter now."

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"Maybe. Maybe not."

"It doesn't. I don't think he saw himself as being much older than his students. Working at the college—well, all I'm saying is, the news that he was going to be a grandfather really shook him up."

"Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No, not much. But he didn't change his clothes or go on with his usual routine. He started drinking wine, so I hurried and made dinner, trying to get him to put some food in his stomach. But he kept drinking throughout dinner. I should have known something was wrong then. But when I hinted that he should stop drinking, he became quite foul-tempered. I didn't feel like putting up with it, not in this heat. So I went back out to the garden. I spent quite a while out there—maybe if I had stayed with him . . . "

"Kaylie, don't. None of this is your fault."

She was silent for a time, then said, "I'm sorry. You must have other questions."

"Not many more. Had he been depressed or anxious lately, other than tonight?"

She reached toward the vase and absently touched a petal on a yellow rose. "I guess it doesn't do any harm to talk about this now."

He waited.

She plucked the petal and held it to her nose, then let it fall to the table. "He didn't talk to me much, Jim. Not about anything. But recently he had started taking Valium. I don't even know the doctor who gave him the prescription."

"Do you know when he last took any?"

She shook her head. "The bottle is in the bathroom. Do you want me to get it for you?"

"No, that's okay, I'll take a look at it in a minute. Did you see him again after you came in from the garden?"

"No—I mean, not alive." She reached up and took another petal from the rose. "This is the part I feel the worst about," she said softly. She looked over at him.

What is she looking for?

She dropped the petal, reached for another one. "I didn't know he was out there. I was out in the garden, then cutting flowers and arranging them in this vase. I thought he had gone out, or that he might have gone to bed early. Then I heard the explosion over at the refinery, and I stood out on the porch and watched the flames for a little while. I turned on the radio and listened to the news

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about it, listened while I washed dishes, cleaned the counters, and mopped the floor. Then I went into the bedroom, where it was cooler. I can't say I was especially surprised that Joseph wasn't there. I go to bed alone quite often. Sometimes he comes in late."

Jim found himself staring at the door to the garage.

"I didn't go out there until much later," she rushed on. "I had some laundry to do. That's when I found him. I came back inside and called you—I mean, called the sheriff's office."

Emma had logged the call in at about nine, when things were still hopping from the fire. "So the last time you saw him was about when?"

"I guess it would have been about six thirty."

"And do you know what time it was when you came in from the garden?"

"A little before sundown; before eight, I suppose."

He looked at his watch. It was just after one o'clock in the morning; the refinery had been burning since eight thirty. The man could have been out there in the garage for a long time. In this heat, even the coroner might find it difficult to set a time of death very accurately. He did as much of the paperwork as he could, then asked if she would mind if he looked around.

She didn't object but asked him if it would be all right if she waited back in the bedroom. "It's cooler in there," she explained.

Remembering the air conditioner, he understood.

He looked over the living room and the professor's study. If Joseph Darren had left a suicide note, it was not on any of the clean and tidy surfaces of either room. There was, in fact, nothing very personal in them. Next he looked through the bathroom. Towels and washcloths neatly folded on the rack; chrome on the fixtures shining, toothbrushes in a holder, toothpaste tube rolled from the bottom. No thumbprint on the bottom edge of medicine cabinet, like you'd see in his own house.

All the contents were in well-ordered rows. The medications were lined up, labels facing out. Nonprescription on one side, prescription on another. The Valium bottle was there, half empty even though it had been recently refilled. Maybe the professor had considered pills before he decided to stick to family tradition.

The other prescriptions were mostly leftover antibiotics; none past its expiration date. There was only one made out to Kaylie. Premarin.

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Premarin. Where had he heard of that before? He stretched and yawned. Premarin. Oh, sure—his mom had taken it. Estrogen, for menopause.

Menopause? Kaylie? Maybe she needed it for some other reason. She was only forty, for godsakes. Some women went through it that early, he knew. But Kaylie?

Well, if she was going through it, she was. It didn't really bother him. No children, but at forty, maybe she didn't want to start a family. Hell, she was going to be a grandmother. Stepgrandmother.

He felt a familiar sensation. Tugging at a mental thread.

Something had bothered him, earlier. In the garage. The light being on? No, he could understand that. She wouldn't turn it off, not with him in there. She walked in, saw him hanging there, probably was so shaken she ran back out and didn't venture back in.

But she *had* ventured back in. He knew then what it was that had bothered him. The dryer. Lord almighty.

He leaned against the sink, suddenly feeling a little sick at his stomach. What kind of woman washed a load of laundry in the same room where her husband was hanging from the rafters?

Slow down. Slow down, he told himself. It was weird, no doubt about it. But not necessarily meaningful. Maybe she cleans when she gets upset. The house was so immaculate it was almost like being in a museum.

He would just ask her about it. He walked to the bedroom door and knocked.

"Come in," she called.

He opened the door. This room, unlike the others, was slightly in disorder. The bed was rumpled, although made. An old fashioned walnut dressing table held a silver mirror and brush and comb, a few lipsticks and other makeup items, a couple of small bottles of perfume and a small cluster of earrings, as if she had been sorting through them, choosing which pair she would wear. Photographs of a couple he recognized as her parents, long dead now, took up most of the rest of the space on it.

Two walnut nightstands, apparently part of the same set as the dressing table, stood at either side of a white, wrought-iron bedstead. The one nearest him was bare of anything but an alarm clock. The one on the other side, nearest Kaylie, held a skewed pile of women's magazines. On top of the magazines was a familiar-looking volume. Their high school yearbook.

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She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in her lap, looking out the window. She hadn't turned toward him, and now, looking at her profile, he saw not Kaylie Darren but Kaylie Lindstrom, the girl he had known in high school. She wore no makeup, no earrings, no perfume. This room was more her room than any other, and the fact that she had shared the bed she sat on with a man as cold and empty as that other nightstand seemed grossly unfair to Jim Lawrence.

She turned toward him, looked at him and smiled a quick little smile and said, "Am I in your way? Did you need to look around in here?"

He couldn't make himself ask her what he needed to ask her, at least not yet. So instead he said, "Why don't you use the air conditioner?"

"It's broken," she said with resignation.

"Let me take a look at it," he said, striding toward the window.

"It's broken," she said again.

"Broken things can be fixed," he said firmly. He bent down to take a look at it, pushing the switches and buttons on the side panel. Nothing.

"Can they?" she was saying. "Surely not all of them. That thing has been broken for years."

He turned back to her, inexplicably irritated by her lack of faith. "Did Professor Joseph Darren ever even *try* to fix this thing?"

Her eyes widened a little, and she smiled again. "No, he just went out and paid someone to put in this ceiling fan. He thought the air conditioner was too noisy anyway."

"That ceiling fan doesn't do much to cool it off in here," he said, reaching into his pocket for his Swiss Army knife.

"No, it doesn't. But it was cool enough for Joseph," she replied, watching him open the knife to a screwdriver implement and start to remove the panel.

I'll just bet it was cool enough for him. The professor apparently had ice in his veins. But was it cool enough for you, Kaylie? His thoughts were brought up short when he pulled the panel away. The problem with the air conditioner wasn't difficult to find. The power cord had been disconnected from the on/off switch terminals. Deliberately. *That son of a bitch.*

"Jim?"

He was too angry to reply. He followed the cord back toward the bed.

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"What are you doing?"

He looked at her, hearing the alarm in her voice. He must have frightened her somehow. He realized he was scowling and headed right toward her. Did Joseph Darren stalk toward her like this in anger, hurt her? He took a breath.

"I'm just going to unplug it. Your—" He stopped himself. He needed to get a grip. He had just been about to tell her of Joseph Darren's deception, and here she was, not a widow for one full night yet. "Your air conditioner is going to be easy to fix. I'll need you to get up for a moment and let me move the bed away from the wall. The outlet is behind the bedstead."

She was looking up at him again, in that way she had looked at him several times this evening *What are you looking for, Kaylie? Tell me.* Her lips parted, almost as if she had heard him, and she clutched at the sheets beneath her.

He waited.

"Jim—" she said, but then looked down, away from his eyes. She stood up and walked away from the bed.

"Kaylie?"

She shook her head, still not looking at him.

He shrugged and reached for the bedstead, and heaved it away from the wall. He bent to unplug the air conditioner, and stopped short. There were footprints on the wall behind the bed.

Two footprints, to be exact. From the soles of a woman's athletic shoes. A little garden dirt, perhaps. Two feet, toes pointing up, slightly apart.

He looked at Kaylie, then back at the footprints. He bent down. While the wooden floor under her side of the bed was dusty, something had slid along the floor under his side. He looked more closely and saw white paint chips missing off one slightly bent rung of the bedstead. The paint chips were on the floor, in the area between and beneath the footprints. He gripped the top of the bedstead, thinking of the single wineglass, picturing her beneath the bed, bracing her feet against the wall, straightening her legs as she pulled . . . the way the direction of the rope marks on the neck would match up with a suicide by hanging. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, it was all still there before him. He slowly straightened.

"He came home one day about twenty years ago and announced that he was going to get a vasectomy," he heard Kaylie say behind him. He couldn't bring himself to look at her. He bent down again

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and unplugged the air conditioner cord, then walked back to the window.

"He had decided that I wasn't going to have any children. He had his child. Lillian. Did you know that child hated me? Not so much any more, but it was awful when she was growing up. I don't think she would have hated me so much if Joseph hadn't told her that I was the reason he didn't marry her mother. He lied. To me and to Lillian and to God knows how many other women. He lied all the time."

"Yes, I know he did," Jim said wearily, and knelt to begin replacing the wiring Joseph Darren had undone.

"Today he told Lillian that she should get rid of the baby."

The screwdriver stopped for a moment, then went on.

He finished replacing the panel and got to his feet, looking out the window at the smoke, which had turned the moon blood red.

Without looking back at her, he knew she hadn't moved. She stood there, silent now.

"Kaylie, I'm an officer of the law." For the first time, his chest felt tight as he said that.

"Yes," he heard her say.

He walked over to the outlet, plugged the air conditioner in, listened as it hummed to life, giving off a dusty smell of disuse.

"You fixed it!"

He looked over at her, at the way her face was lit up in approval and admiration.

"Yes," he said, and moved the bed back against the wall.

He walked back to the air conditioner, adjusted its settings. He closed his eyes and bent his face to it, letting the cool air blow against him; felt it flattening his eyelashes and buffeting his hot skin.

"Kaylie."

"Yes?"

"Go turn the clothes dryer off."

She hesitated, but then he heard her leave the room, heard her going out into the garage. He looked out the window and saw the headlights of other cars coming toward the house. He stood up straight, lifting his fingers to his badge, feeling the now-chilled metal beneath them.

Fifteen years as a deputy sheriff, only to come to this.

Why tonight, he wondered.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The case of the missing ancestor. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "Mid-December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 283.

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Late September Dogs

by Gene KoKayKo

Standing in the waves, Rube figured everything he had had gone south already—his hair and his chest and the arches in his feet. So why should he, Barney Rubekowski, follow them? His friends had gone south, too, most to Florida, and Rube had wanted to start over somewhere new, somewhere warmer than the East Coast but not quite so far south . . . so retired. Somehow southern California still seemed too south and too much a copout, so Rube had settled for the central coast of California, west but right in between. This way he could see the big O, the Pacific, not that dribble the Atlantic, or some Gulf of Something, but the big P, the real ocean.

And so what if he couldn't swim? And so what if he no longer looked quite so good in a bathing suit? He could wade, couldn't he? He could wade and splash a little way into the great surf. He had his pension and his new apartment and his number fifteen sunblock; and the sun was bright and not too hot and the world belonged to him and the big old dog who was the only other creature on the beach this early in the morning. He had beaten the odds, made it out of the rat race, found home—in spite of what old what's-his-name had said you couldn't do again—and by damn he was going to—

What did that dog have in his mouth?

Rube felt a flush of curiosity, then a flash of apprehension as he saw the human hand. The dog was big, a yellowish Labrador, and even from where Rube stood in the waves, he could tell the dog was careworn. His tail was ringed with scabs, as if some greater animal had taken small chunks along the way, had chewed the tail when the Lab wasn't looking. It gave the tail a diseased look, like some aging raccoon that was losing its fur. The dog stood on the shore, but Rube could still clearly see the human hand. The big Lab had it between his teeth as if worrying a snack, and he was trying to pull the hand from a huge clump of greenish seaweed. Rube could tell the dog was a he, too, the dog all spraddle-legged like that, and Rube shook his head at the observation, wondering

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why, at times of stress, he always noticed things like that. It was a character flaw, he felt. One he'd always had. If there was a terrible accident in the street, he would not only see the accident but all the attendant sights and sounds on the periphery. He'd see the car make, the color, the license plate number. He'd remember later the kind of day: cloudy or bright, approximate air temperature, number of clouds. Everyone else would be screaming, "Oh my God, the blood!," and good old Rube would be checking out the details. Inside, Rube thought, where no one could see. There was something wrong with him. He had no real compassion, perhaps, for humanity and its tragedy.

Rube splashed toward the dog. As he did, his focus frayed again and he saw: almost deserted beach, one flock of gulls a hundred yards down picking over some trash; a sky misty with alto cumulus; a sun melting through the clouds, still rising toward zenith; and a breeze softly tossing more trash along . . . the breeze plucked at the sweat on his forehead.

The dog saw Rube coming. He growled around the hand, then started to back, with the hand still in his mouth. The clump of seaweed shifted slightly.

"Easy now," Rube said, splashing up on the sand, "easy boy," as though he were trying to settle a big horse that was about to buck. Hell, the dog was big as a horse. But that wasn't the real reason—that wasn't the real fear. Rube was trying to settle himself because he didn't want to see what the dog had—not really. From a distance this was all very interesting, but from up close there was a chance it would get gruesome. Worse, it might interfere with Rube's new life. If what was attached to that human hand was a human body, then he'd be involved. And he hadn't come to the coast of California to get involved. He'd come here to retire.

The big dog lowered his head, as if to hide the contents of his mouth.

"Don't you swallow that!" Rube shouted.

The dog's eyes were big and white and they seemed to turn in the great head and accuse him.

"Drop it, now!"

But the dog didn't. He pulled instead, a muscle-wrenching heave of a pull that suddenly exposed a white arm. The rest of the body was tangled up in the big clump of green seaweed, and Rube told himself he couldn't really see. Couldn't really see the white, bare shoulder, and exposed breast, and the big gaping hole.

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Rube turned away and put his hands on his shaky knees. "Ah, Jesus Holy Jehoshaphat."

His arms shook, and the sweat spilled down his forehead. Salty, it burned its way down his face like a track of guilty tears.

He could hear the dog worrying the hand, a small whimper through his large white teeth. Rube realized he'd bitten his own lower lip so hard the blood ran down his chin. He ran the tip of his tongue over the spot, licking it back like a wounded animal. He felt wounded.

But alive. And breathing.

The body tangled in the seaweed was not. The body tangled in the kelp was way past any thought or consideration for such mundane physical needs.

How to get the dog away?

Rube straightened and wiped the smear from his chin. He stomped toward the dog, big splashing steps in the sand. Pebbles flew, but the dog stayed. Whimpering.

"You gotta let go of that," Rube begged.

The dog growled around the fingers of the hand.

Rube backed off and picked through the sand until he had a neat handful of sharp stones. He started pegging them at the yellow Lab. The first fell short. Rube grimaced and bore down and fired the next, hard, at the dog's flank. The dog yelped, hitching sideways, but he held onto the hand. The dog seemed to grin around the shredded flesh like some demon from hell. Rube started throwing rocks as fast as he could: one, two, three, striking the dog along the body; and *finally*, the dog romped sideways, dropping the shredded hand. He stood with his big head hanging, looking back as if mournful over his loss.

"Just stay now—just stay." Rube waggled his finger at the dog, and the dog dropped to his haunches. Still whimpering. Still looking mournfully at the body.

Rube didn't want to look down, but he'd earned the right. On top of the kelp now, he could see more. Her hair was long and darkened by the sea, but her eyes were open and light, the color of green he remembered from old Coke bottles in his youth. They stared up but past him with a look of accusation and shock, a "how dare you look at me like this" look that made him glance toward the dog. The dog started to whine.

Rube started to whine, unknowingly, a soft whimper that sounded angry with the gentler sounds of the sea. He'd seen death

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before, but all of it in hospitals, where the smell and sights were antiseptic. Everything controlled, everything nasty beneath sheets. Her body lay tangled in the kelp, but it was bloated, the flesh too pale to be real and alive, the look from her eyes changing in the twinkling morning light, a look that filled him with sorrow, then shock as he saw the gaping hole between her breasts. Rube heard it then, the sound he made, a sound he remembered until the last: piteous and sorrowful and low and moaning—a sound like a worshipper at the wailing wall, a sound almost prehuman, a whimper of such mixed emotions that he felt lust and hate and fear all wrapped up into one. Rube shut his mouth and the sound died.

The dog whined again.

Rube opened his mouth to shush the dog but once again heard the moan start from his own mouth. He clamped his teeth together, reopening the cut on his lip. "I shoulda gone to Florida," he said to the dog.

The dog hung his head but stopped whimpering.

Her dress was in tatters, little left . . . no blood though, just the ugly gaping wound. Rube felt the strangest compulsion to reach out and touch—

Those peripheral senses again, intruding. Rube heard the crunch of big tires on sand, and he smelled something not of the sea, or of death, but of machinery. He jerked his head up.

The Jeep was almost touching him, a big chrome bumper near his face. Rube could smell the hot radiator and see the specks of rust on the front fenders.

He heard the door shut. Heard the crunch of sand beneath hard soles.

"Don't move, mister."

Somewhere close there was a crackling sound of voices, and Rube realized it was from a radio transmitter. But he couldn't focus on what the voices said. He was too busy looking down the barrel of the gun.

Waves crashed behind him. The air smelled of salt and . . . bloat? No. The body didn't have an odor. The kelp did. It smelled of decay, as if the ocean were dying.

Rube found his voice while he stared down the bore of the gun. "We found her in the surf. Well . . . he did, actually."

"Figures," said the man holding the gun. "Old Buddy's always into something he shouldn't be."

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Rube shook and sweated in the warming sun. "You have to point that thing at me?"

The sheriff's face creased, almost a grin. "I guess not."

The sheriff knelt down beside Rube.

"Jesus," he said, looking at the wound. "Woulda killed two her size."

The sheriff's office was a corner of an already small building on Main Street, and it smelled bad. Rube was tired by now; they'd stood around for an hour waiting for the forensics team before the sheriff would leave the scene.

"Have a seat," the sheriff said as they entered the room. Rube saw that the paint was new, some neutral pastel between beige and cream in color. A painting of an old windmill hung crookedly behind the steel desk and leather executive chair. A wooden-backed straight chair stood in front of the desk. There was no carpeting, just a hard-textured floor, as if thinly veiled, wood-covered concrete.

Rube sat. The paint stank and Rube's legs ached. Jesus Jehoshaphat, what a mess. He wanted to slip off his shoes. He'd put them back on at the beach, but they were wet inside. They squished slightly when he wiggled his toes.

"Damned painters," the sheriff muttered. He filled the leather chair arm to arm. He sniffed. "Makes my nose run." His face was wide and almost chinless, the lines smoothed out with flesh, but there was a hint of hollowness beneath the deep-set brown eyes. The plaque on his desk said SHERIFF JOHN BOGGERT. Nothing more.

"You wanna go over it one more time, Mr. . . . ?"

"Rubekowski," Rube said. "And no, I don't. I told you how I found her twice, and that's all there is. My story won't change with a third telling."

Sheriff Boggert muttered something about tourists, how they were more trouble than—

"I live here," Rube said. "I'm not a damned tourist. And I've told you all I know. Book me or let me go."

Sheriff John glared at Rube with his haunted eyes. "Oh now, don't get excited and swallow your gum. This is just procedure until I get the coroner's report."

Rube stood. "Which is it to be?"

"You live here, huh? Funny, I don't remember seeing you around town."

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"Just moved," Rube said. "A week ago."

"Current address?"

"Three fifty East Main, that old house back by the creek."

The sheriff scribbled on a pad. "Yeah, the old Huffinton place. You renting or buying?"

"Renting. For now. Why?"

"Just curious."

They stared at each other after that, in the ensuing silence. Finally the sheriff sighed, then stood. Rube held his stare.

"Go on home. But I'll be in touch."

Rube nodded and stood himself. He backed out the door.

And that's that, he thought. He threaded his way through the tourists with a sense of anger. He'd only done his civic duty. Why was Boggert so nasty?

But then Rube thought of the woman in the kelp, the big dog gnawing possessively on her hand. God, she was so cold. She radiated cold. Colder than the sea had been when his bare feet hit it early that morning.

The thought cooled some of Rube's anger, but the images playing in the minefields of his brain made him wobble a bit and he strayed into a fat lady with a big sack and almost tipped her over. He caught himself and bowed and made apologies—though she glared at him in anger, beady little tourist eyes like two stones fitted in a bowl of fat—and Rube wobbled on over to a bench in the plaza off the street and let his head down on his arms.

He wondered, as he buried his head, where the big old dog, Buddy, had gone?

Rube would have been all right if it weren't for the other memory. He shook off most of the day's effects, made a light supper of tuna on French bread, with a nice salad; he cleaned the apartment—it was a house, not an apartment, but he couldn't shake his East Coast mentality. The place had one bedroom and a living room-kitchenette, with the inevitable sliding doors that led to the little deck looking out upon nothing. Actually there was a view back there, a wispy tree that loomed high over the garden plot and cut the afternoon sunlight to a drizzle. Beyond there was a hill that towered and cut the morning sunlight, but that was okay. Rube could live with a few shadows.

But then he'd lain down to rest and he'd almost dozed off when that old memory kicked in to reveal a scene he thought lost forever.

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His only other visit to an ocean marched like a slideshow past his inner eyes. Only this was the Atlantic, a long time ago. He'd just received his first promotion from Mercer Chemical, a boost up from common chemist to research supervisor, and the boss had taken a group of them out on his fishing boat. The day was blustery and bright, the ocean a cruel, hard-edged blue with waves that frothed and leaped against the boat. The other supervisors were old hands, playing with their fishing tackle, but Rube just held to the rail and stared out at the sea. In front of the bow something long and sleek and beautiful leaped and swam, and Rube was hypnotized by the sight. He turned to ask his boss about this beautiful thing, but his boss was leaning next to the rail, an ugly harpoon in his big hands, yelling at the mate, "Close on it! Starboard now, quickly!" and his big arm moved and the harpoon flew and the blue-grey skin of the dolphin erupted with a flash bright as a red flower. Bright as the red carnations Eleshia had grown in their garden before the cancer took her. The harpoon ripped the dolphin's flesh as the cancer had ripped Eleshia's. Only there was something more terrible about the harpoon wound. Something more insidious and needless because it was wielded by a man who didn't need to kill. The cancer had been mindless . . .

Rube sat up in a sweat and tried to shake off the mix of images. Two dreams in one, both horrible memories, both repressed; but that's what was bothering him. He'd seen a wound like that before, and it was definitely made by a harpoon.

Outside the late afternoon sun filtered weakly through the leaves of the big tree above his tiny deck. Someone had harpooned that girl, Rube was certain of it now.

He put his shoes and socks back on and plucked a lightweight nylon jacket from the back of the chair and shut the house door behind him. Rube had never said a word to his boss about the slaying of the dolphin, had just stood open-mouthed and dumbfounded and shocked. He was afraid to spill out his anger, was afraid of losing his precious job and his new promotion. In some small way he'd hated his lack of courage for years now. But he'd have to talk to Sheriff Boggert again. He had to tell the man what he knew.

The tourists had thinned out, and the going was clear. To the west, over the Pacific, the sky was turning pink from the refraction of dust in the clouds. Rube cursed his scientist's mind as he thought it. Why ruin a pretty image like that, with the petty small knowl-

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edge of why it happened? But it was part and parcel of the animal he was, the mind he lived in, and he'd grown more accepting with age.

The pink in the clouds was quickly turning red, and Rube kept seeing the rent in the girl's chest. She'd probably been pretty, and she was obviously young. And now she's dead, a part of his mind screamed. Or was it some horrible accident? Was it some terrible mishap that no one wanted to report? Maybe by now someone had reported it.

Sheriff Boggert would know.

Much as Rube hated seeing the man again.

He almost missed the tiny office as he walked by with his head down, but the caustic smell of new paint made him follow his nose back.

No light inside.

Door shut and locked; he jiggled it to make sure. Hours listed said ten A.M. to five P.M. It was only a few minutes past five. Rube started to walk off, then thought better of it. He stepped back to the door and took out his notepad and pen, scribbled on it, and slipped the note beneath the door. No sense irritating the authorities any more than he had to. Sheriff Boggert looked like a man who was anxious to jail someone—like a man hard put by the demands of a one-man job. Rube didn't want to be his victim. Being new to a small town was a lot like a kid's first day at school. The bullies and the big guys had a tendency to pick on you.

Go home, he told himself. Go back to your little place and turn on the TV and shut the front door and let it all pass.

And he started to, had turned on the sidewalk and was heading back for the east side of town, when the horn beeped and made him turn his head. Boggert's big dog face stared at him from his big black and blue sheriff's Jeep.

"You're blocking traffic like that," Rube said, still walking as the Jeep followed him down Main Street.

"Don't matter," Boggert called through the window. "They can go around."

They moved on like that, a pair of old dogs sizing each other up. And in the city where Rube grew up, the people would have gone around. Here, though, in this tiny beach town, people just stayed behind the sheriff's Jeep, forming a line of cars back to the last street.

"I left you a note," Rube called, still walking.

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"I ain't got time to go get it." The Jeep lurched ahead and pulled over, half blocking the sidewalk. The door popped open. "Get in, Rubekowski."

Rube stared at the open door as though it were the open mouth of a shark.

But Rube got in. He pulled the big door shut after him, but he left his seatbelt undone in protest.

The sheriff turned a corner, still cruising, his eyes moving left and right over the shops and people. "What the note say?"

"I know how she died," Rube said.

Boggert leaned his head back and chuckled, the sound as deep and vibrant as breakers against the sand.

"Something put a big damned hole in her, Rubekowski. That's how she died."

Rube shook his head in irritation. "Somebody harpooned her."

Boggert looked angry. He glared at Rube like he might at a precocious child. "The hell you say."

Rube stayed with the big sheriff's eyes: they locked like lovers in an ugly embrace.

"It's not a wound I'd forget," Rube said. "I saw it once before."

"You saw someone harpooned before?"

Rube hesitated. "Not exactly a person, no, but—"

"Yeah, sure," Boggert said. He shook his big dog head. "You know, Rubekowski, we got coroner's reports for this, and that's what we're waiting for."

Rube looked away, through the big windshield. The sun was lower now, dark plucking at the buildings, and the wind had picked up. A Dixie cup splattered against the glass and Rube twitched an inch in his seat.

"Won't the trail get cold, sheriff?"

Boggert's eyes stabbed at Rube from across the seat. "We don't even know, to begin with, how long she was in the water. Coulda been a couple of days. The trail is already cold." The sheriff let it go with a tiny shake of his head, as though castigating himself for talking to this man at all.

"Besides, what do you care, Rubekowski? What's your interest in all this?"

Rube continued to stare through the windshield. It was a Friday evening, and the tourists were starting to pack the sidewalks again. As though L.A. and San Francisco had emptied their streets, had set the wanderers loose to rape and pillage . . . the way Rube

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felt Mercer Chemical had raped and pillaged, with methods too insidious to bring to trial. Subtle hurts upon the public. Subtle acts against nature. And what was his interest in the case? What answer could he give this bulldog of a man who worked for the public good?

"It's the indecency of it." Rube moved his hands in the air as though he could draw a picture the sheriff could understand. "The way someone just punctured her body with a harpoon, as if she were a fish—something less than human."

For the first time, Boggert smiled. It wasn't a smile that Rube would have liked over a friendly lunch, was more of a contemptuous sneer. "You think death is pretty, all wrapped in neat motives and easy death? Some sigh where the actress turns her head left and quietly passes away?" The big man snorted and burst into a quick but nasty laugh of derision.

Maybe Rube did. Maybe that's what he expected. Something from a TV tube or big screen where the blood was makeup and the actress opened her eyes and walked away. But this lady wasn't walking, had lain bloated and violated, and no one even knew her name. Rube remembered her tattered green dress, a sheath that was torn too badly even to serve as a shroud.

"Do you know yet . . . who she is?"

Boggert snapped his gaze back to Rube's. "Was, you mean?"

Rube met his eyes with shock that quickly wore to a sad kind of moisture, as though he'd picked up a small piece of dirt in the corner of his eye. At least he explained it to his inner self that way.

"Yeah, was," Rube said. "Who was she?"

The sheriff's face went stone hard and cold. "Somebody's little girl. Somebody's loved one." His voice, gruff now and husky, skipped a beat. "Somebody's . . . hate. I'm not gonna to tell you who she was; there's no reason for you to know."

The sheriff coughed to cover his emotion, as if feeling were a mistake he wouldn't make again. Not soon.

Rube could only nod and blink his wet eyes as the twilight sun closed in on the tiny tourist town and its evening shoppers.

But Boggert softened then, and a small, friendly smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "I'll let you know as soon as I find out more. Meantime, you go home. Get some sleep. Rearrange your furniture or tinker in your garden. But stay outa mine. Okay?"

Rube stayed silent. He felt grim and patronized.

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"Sure, sheriff," he said, stepping out after Boggert stopped the Jeep.

Rube walked away without looking back.

The trouble was . . . Rube couldn't sleep.

At first he thought it was his new place, the strange way the night wind blew the tree against the railing on the back deck. The rustling was like a yearning, a soft silky sound, like cloth against flesh. Green dress, tattered dress, rent with the hate of someone's child. The thoughts were night thoughts, and they chased the real night sounds across the pictures in his mind with a frightening clarity.

He remembered the wound so clearly because it had shocked his middle-class values. Rube had never been to war or done battle in a squared off circle as some men had, and his lifetime of toil had come not in a sweatshop or a factory but a modern day laboratory where he played with chemical combinations that sometimes healed and sometimes—he feared—killed. But that had been his life and he'd cherished those values, and when his boss had shown him the array of harpoons, each designed a bit differently, each with a more vicious type of head to gouge or bite into the flesh of the fish, Rube felt a bit squeamish. He should have shaken it off, would have, eventually, would have accepted the killing as part of everyday living, except the fish wasn't a fish but a mammal—an intelligent creature. The dolphin had been off the starboard bow, playing, teasing the waves and the sun when his boss blasted him from the water like so much detritus—so much cheap trash.

Rube rolled over. Emotional old man, he chided. In the night his voice sounded cold and lonely and a little creaky.

Someone had torn a hole through that young girl.

Emotional old man?

Rube had no children. And his wife was long dead. And now he had no work. At sixty-two he could see it all stretch out before him, too many good years left and not enough to do. "Good an excuse as any," he mumbled. He sat up and rubbed his face and strained through the darkness with eyes accustomed to more light. He couldn't see the tree that sounded so much like cloth against flesh, but he could smell the night, the salty core of it blowing from the ocean. All that life below the waves. Struggling to survive. One big mouth closing over a smaller tail. Eat and thrash and survive because the world made you that way?

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But who made a world that harpooned young girls?

"Jesus Jehoshaphat, next I'll be crying in my beer and going to revival meetings and . . . " But he couldn't shake off the image of her body lying in the surf with that big hole through her chest, as though someone had performed an Aztec ritual and ripped her heart loose the hard way.

"Do something else," Boggert had warned. "Rearrange your furniture or tinker in your garden, but stay out of mine."

But he couldn't. He stood by the bed and wobbled for a moment as the feeling returned to his legs, then he reached for his clothes draped over the chair back.

Except for the Salty Dog, the village looked deserted. As Rube walked toward it, the breeze washed his face with a tangy fog as heavy as cigarette smoke. Rube could hear the twang of a steel guitar and the high tinkle of glasses followed by garish laughter. Light, soft and gold and warm looking, seeped through the open door. Rube padded down the sidewalk in his brown chinos and black nylon jacket, rubbing at his stubbled face. He should have shaved, but he'd been too restless and shaky not to cut himself.

Inside, the bar looked like mahogany, running full length from rear to front. Bright red leather sparkled with chrome trim, though only half the seats were full. Rube took a stool near the end and winced as the bartender stuck his big ugly face across the distance between them. His breath was bad—onions and bourbon and cigarettes, with a touch of garlic.

"What'll it be?"

"Just a draft beer."

Rube sipped and glanced around. The tiny dance floor was empty except for a pair of young people in cowboy hats. They nuzzled each other's necks as they danced close, their bodies wiggling like upright snakes in some intricate mating dance. Beyond them, in the back, old men sat hunched together in one of the booths. Their clothes were rough-hewn, and their faces were bearded. They talked in low tones, like conspirators, but their whispers carried.

"It's that po-lution, from the big chemical plants—you know there's a power plant right next to the Morro Bay Fishery?"

"Well, whatever, the fish ain't running. It's take tourists out or starve. On bad days I begin to think I'd rather starve . . . "

Their accents were flat and hard, no accents at all.

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Rube sipped his beer. The music played again. The same couples danced.

Maybe coming out had been a mistake. What was he doing? Looking for clues? Maybe the sheriff was right. Tend your own garden and stay out of his.

Something big and furry and yellow caught his eye.

Rube turned on the bar stool. In the golden light from the bar, the dog's eyes looked feral and ancient and judging. He sat like a huge, fur-covered lump just outside the door—sat way back on his haunches—but his eyes seemed to search the smoky room.

Rube remembered the way the big dog had worried the girl's hand. As though he could bring her back to life if he could just pull her from the clump of seaweed.

The boogie brass rumbled through the bar's stereo system, a sound so loud Rube thought he saw the smoke quiver with the vibrations.

The dog whimpered.

"You wanna 'nother brew?" Smell of garlic laced with rum.

"No, thanks," Rube said, turning to the barkeep. "You know that dog?"

"Personally?"

Rube wasn't in the mood. It was nearly midnight and he was suddenly more keyed up than ever. He needed to do something that would at least allow him to go home and sleep. Just one little fact would do it. Such as—why the dog sat there.

The bartender started to turn away, then changed his mind. Almost wistfully, Rube thought, the big man with the garlic breath looked at the yellow dog. "That's . . . that used to be Betty and Jesse's mutt."

As though that was enough in the way of explanation.

"I don't understand 'used to be,' " Rube said softly.

The barkeep played with his bar rag, mopping at a damp spot. When he looked up, his eyes were redder than before, as though something painful had kicked him from the inside of his skull.

"That girl you found this morning . . . her name was Betty Sturgis. She was engaged to a guy named Jesse, a local fisherman. Buddy was their dog." His eyes had gone deeper now, seeking out whatever hurt inside. "The dog used to wait for them out there—just like he is now."

Rube stared stupidly at what was left of his brew. Then he asked what seemed the logical question. "Why doesn't Jesse take him home?"

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ON TOP OF THE HILL THE SHADOW OF A MAN DANCED DOWN THE ROAD, THE SHADOW THROWN LONG AND STICKLIKE . . .

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The bartender gulped at something invisible in his throat. "You don't know why?"

Rube shook his head. "I wouldn't ask if I did."

The dog whimpered.

The bartender seemed to make a decision, and his face turned angry and red. "Damned tourist. Drink your beer and go on back to L.A. or wherever you came from."

"I'm not a tourist," Rube said softly.

But the bartender was beyond reasoning. "Then you should know, dammit."

Rube sat stiffly.

"Jesse's dead," he said. "Been dead a week now."

Rube felt like someone had clubbed him. "I'm sorry," he finally managed, but the bartender had already turned and gone.

Rube stood and stared past the bar, then walked out into the night.

The dog stumbled up to all fours, tongue lolling.

"So we meet again," Rube said in a whisper.

The dog whimpered, then shut his mouth and followed Rube down the sidewalk.

Every time Rube stopped, the dog stopped behind him. Rube finally turned and pointed back down the street. "Go home, Buddy. Do you hear me?"

Rube realized the stupidity of his words. The dog no longer had a home. His owners were dead.

The knowledge haunted Rube as he walked toward his house. The street forked here, the left tongue of the fork slanting off at a steep angle that rose to Saint Anne's Cemetery. Up there, above the town, was a small wooden chapel painted white, its stark crucifix like some Celtic dagger that hung askew above the double doors. A big spotlight lit the front of the chapel. Like a used car lot, Rube thought painfully.

Rube was staying to the right, trying to shake off the night's bad feelings, when the dog growled behind him. The growl was sinister, and Rube tensed, thinking perhaps the dog was going to run up his heels and take away some hide. Instead, the dog blew past Rube so fast his pants cuffs rose in the breeze. Rube watched as the snarling Labrador streaked up the hill.

On top of the hill the shadow of a man danced down the road, the shadow thrown long and sticklike from the large spotlight. Buddy was almost invisible in the night, blending with the yellow

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bushes on the side of the road, but his shadow too was finally caught and projected, until both shadows came together.

Then the shadows broke, the man's shorter as he turned and ran off. Down the other side? Rube found his feet turning to the left fork, starting up the hill of their own accord.

Buddy had paused at the crest, dropping his haunches to the asphalt. His leonine head went back, and he wailed.

The man's stick-figure came back, the shadow growing from nowhere, and the dog rose on his haunches, head lowered, the growl almost a hiss.

Rube tried to hurry, but the hill was steep and his legs wobbled.

Shadows crashed together, then disappeared over the crest of the hill.

Rube's heart pounded. The big spotlight caught him, and he stopped and shaded his eyes and stared up at the crucifix. Shadows played there, a halo formed from insects buzzing the light. "Give me strength," he muttered. He stopped for just a moment to rest his palms on his thighs, fighting for air. Past the light he could see the edge of a steel fence. There was a gap there, where someone had slid back a gate. Beyond, in the dim slice of moon, he could make out tombstones. Like huge teeth they curved away and down. The air felt colder suddenly, as if a door had opened on some Nordic hell. Rube shivered and rubbed himself. What was he looking for—besides the dog and the sticklike shadow of a man? Then he saw the dog. Buddy lay sprawled across the length of a grave. The earth was freshly turned, and there was no headstone yet. But there were stones on either side.

Rube moved gingerly, muttering to Buddy as he went. "Easy, boy. It's okay."

The words echoed.

Buddy sniffed and shuffled to his feet. He moved off the grave, just a few paces, and sniffed at the ground.

Darker here, the spotlight pointing the other way, down the long hill.

Rube fumbled in his jacket pocket for a book of matches.

The wind blew out the first.

"Damn." His voice sounded hollow and old.

He cupped the next and held it to the nearest tombstone.

Before he could read what it said, he noticed a fresh bouquet of flowers by the head of the mound. Buddy had half crushed them, and now the wind threatened to blow them away.

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Rube stared at the tombstone next to the fresh mound. "In Loving Memory of Maria, Mother of Jesse, Husband of Walter. May all your seas be fair."

He died a week ago. The bartender's words, still fresh in Rube's memory. They were engaged.

The dog whined.

The few facts Rube knew gnawed at his mind. What were the odds, he wondered, of such a coincidence? Dying within a week of each other? And how had Jesse died?

The match almost burned his fingers then, and he lost his concentration. He closed his eyes tightly for a time, balancing himself with one hand on the tombstone of Jesse's mother. When he opened his eyes again, he could see better. With age, he'd noticed, everything took longer, even his night vision. Now, as he looked around on the ground, he noticed the new grave was scuffed and torn, as though a pitched battle had taken place.

"Buddy? Are you all right?"

He slowly moved toward the dog, who put his head between his paws and looked mournful.

Rube felt the big dog's head. Wet! His first thought was blood, and he lifted his hand to his face, expecting the worst. But it was just water with a slight floral scent. He knelt down and searched around the head of the new grave. A shard of pottery caught the moonlight. A larger shard lay a few feet away. And another.

"He hit you with the vase, didn't he?"

Buddy sniffed.

Rube picked up the bouquet of flowers now loosely strewn across the mounded earth. Pretty little things with pointy petals. Early poinsettias, he realized. From someone's garden. And something else. At first he thought it was another flower, a stray, very dark red petal. But then he felt it between his fingers. It didn't shred like the flesh of a plant. Cloth. And the red was blood. He was sure of it even before he brought it to his nose and sniffed. Fresh blood. Just a hint of metal there—copper or iron. Blood had a smell. He had worked in enough labs to know that.

"You got a piece of him, huh, boy?"

Buddy whined, then lifted his head. Rube dangled the piece of cloth in front of the dog's nose. The dog rose unsteadily, back legs wobbling. He leaned forward, though, and sniffed the cloth. Then he let out a yowl that made Rube jump.

"Easy, you'll wake the—"

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Then Rube remembered where he was.

Go home and go to bed, he told himself. In the morning he would take the cloth down and give it to Boggert, a gift from the town's newest resident. Hell, it wasn't his job.

And he almost had himself convinced. He made it to the bottom of the hill with Buddy trailing him. A little dazed, but the dog was starting to get his legs beneath him again. At the bottom, Rube started to turn left, toward home, but Buddy's growl stopped him.

Worse, his old habit of noticing details kicked in. Like a bad habit.

Rube turned to see the dog sniffing at spots on the walkway. Could be anything, Rube told himself. Some kid dripped his milk nickel in the heat of the day. Some tourist had a leaky beach bucket. But he knew better, even before the dog started to seriously sniff and follow the spots. Whoever had hit Buddy on the head had gotten past him in the dark. Wouldn't be hard to do. And Buddy had gotten a piece of him before whoever it was conked the old dog on the head. Now Buddy smelled his blood on the sidewalk.

Buddy started to trot, an ungainly thing seen from Rube's perspective. But the big dog ate the distance like a racehorse, even trotting.

"Buddy!"

No use.

Go home and go to bed.

But he couldn't.

Wait and tell Boggert tomorrow.

But he couldn't. He felt responsible somehow.

Rube turned and started after the dog, running a little.

The saloon was almost empty as Rube trotted by. He craned his neck and saw the big bartender leaning over to jaw with a lady holding a pool stick. Even the old fishermen in back had left.

Call me a tourist, huh?

At the end of the street the sheriff's office sat dark and closed. The Jeep was missing from the lot. Rube knew too little about the town or sheriff. His landlord had said the sheriff was new, that they shared him with Morro Bay and another tiny town along the coast. This wasn't New York, he reminded himself.

He slowed to a walk, blowing hard.

The marine layer found Rube before he found the turnoff to the harbor. First the slice of moon disappeared, as though a hungry gray sky had devoured it. Then the street lights started to blink

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out, nothing left but a fuzz of light through the heavy mist.

Rube shivered as he walked, fingering the bloody patch of cloth. The fog was too thick; he couldn't see. He turned to go home.

Buddy howled—only this time there was anger in the howl, the sound of a predator.

Rube moved through the fog toward the sound.

A hull creaked against a dock, water slapped—but he couldn't see a foot in front of him. Stumble around like a foolish tourist and fall in the water and get washed out to sea and drown yourself. My God, Rubekowski, what would old Sheriff Boggert and the bartender say to that? Think of the laugh they'd have at your funeral, you old—

And then he heard something he'd hear again and again, many nights, in his worst dreams. A thwock of wood on bone, a heartrending, terrible sound. Only to be surpassed by a worse sound, an awful whiny little dog sound, like a puppy lost and alone.

Rube tried to part the fog as Moses must have the Red Sea. If sheer will had been enough, the night would have cleared. But as it was, Rube just stumbled forward, his hands waving helplessly in front of his body, like a man batting at a smokescreen. His foot stumbled on something, something that was solid and rose at an angle from the ground. He walked up the gangplank, realizing as he did so that he was almost blind. The thought hadn't cleared his mind when he stumbled over the edge of something and went flailing forward to land on all fours. Pain shot from a knee up through his hip, but he clenched his teeth and kept the whimper to himself. He'd just caught his balance when the boat lurched and he lost it again. What fool would move a boat in this fog, he wondered, grabbing for the deck. He hugged the deck and tried to breathe deep while listening once again for the dog's whimper. Instead he heard a bell. A buoy marker, he realized. He'd heard them earlier when he was wading. Beneath his body there was a thrumming now, a deep engine sound as the boat moved toward the marker.

This is crazy. He can't see. He'll crash and—

As they moved, someone shuffled through the fog. Rube could see a disturbance in the misty textures, like a ghost passing.

Buddy whimpered. A soft, hurt kind of sound. But then it grew and he started to howl.

"I'll shut ya up." That awful *thwock* again.

Silence.

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Rube stood. His balance was bad, but he was determined to stay up. He moved toward the last sounds he heard.

The late September onshore breeze picked up and plucked at the fog, thinning it, and light streamed from an open cabin. Rube could see a figure hunched over something. The man's hand was raised.

A belaying pin, Rube realized, as thick as a man's forearm and shorter than a Louisville Slugger. The man was waving it above Buddy's head. Buddy lay on his side, one paw up, as if to defend himself.

"Ya had to have a chunk of me, huh? Again? You're worse than the little bitch that owned ye. She had to have it all, too. Killing my boy wasn't enough. She wanted the captain's boat. My home. My home since Maria died."

The voice was a slow rave.

"I couldn't do it. I couldn't, you see? I had to—"

Rube stepped on something loose on the deck, a corner of a tarp. The sound wasn't much, but the old man spun.

Rube thought of at least three things to say but couldn't get them out his mouth.

"What are you doing on my boat?"

"I heard the dog whimper," Rube said. It sounded lame, and he knew it. Then again, it was the truth. Or most of it.

Rube stared at Buddy. The dog's head leaked blood.

"He's a bad dog," the captain said.

"I don't understand," Rube said.

"He attacked me at my son's grave," the captain continued. The way the old man went on, Rube almost felt he was talking to himself. "The dog's old, and he's gone quite mad, I'm afraid."

The boat still moved toward the buoy marker, out to sea, and Rube wondered how he steered. An automatic pilot setting, maybe? The mist was just that now, no longer heavy enough to call fog, and Rube could clearly see the old captain's face, the potato nose and the reddened, wrinkled skin. The chin was hidden in a thatch of heavy beard. But the blue eyes held Rube's, and they accused.

"Look," Rube said, "he's an old dog. I'm an old man, too. I understand the madness of retirement. Let me take the dog."

The captain glared at him—the way they all did at tourists.

"I've got room at my place, and a yard." And a garden I haven't started, he almost added, thinking he'd start one, thinking of the sheriff and how much he wished Boggert were here. Wish you were here, to protect the tourist? Like a joke message on a bad postcard.

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But Rube meant it. There was something lethal in the captain's eyes and stance. The man wouldn't let him go, and Rube knew it.

The captain moved from his position over the half-conscious dog. "You followed me, didn't you?"

Rube backed up clumsily. "No. I followed the dog."

"You're clever, no?"

"No," Rube said.

The captain's eyes changed for just a second. He seemed unsteadier than the deck should make him. Fatigue or drink or grief?

"She thought she was clever, too," the captain said.

Rube tried to look stupid. Hell, he felt stupid enough, swaying on the deck of a fishing boat next to a sad old dog half unconscious on the deck. Trouble was, he knew what the captain was talking about. Kind of. She had to be the girl Rube had found in the seaweed. And it must have shown on his face.

"It's too bad," the old captain said.

The light from the pilot's house seemed to surround him as he thwocked the club heavily into one hand. "She thought she could steal Jesse from the sea, from me and his rightful heritage. She thought she could steal an old man's life."

Rube backpedaled clumsily toward the center of the deck. But sea legs must take time or special practice because he stumbled and fell backwards over a row of crates. His head banged hard, and the night darkened for a second. When his head cleared, the captain stood above him.

"She had no right to any of it," the captain said.

"Of course not," Rube agreed.

Rube felt like he was floating on the deck; he was dizzy even lying down, and he reached out for something to grab, something solid. His hand wrapped around a pole as round as a broomstick, in a rack. He grabbed the stick and pulled himself up, at least halfway, before the stick pulled loose and Rube clattered back to the deck. He still held the stick, though. The end gleamed in the light from the cabin, like a spear.

Later, there would be thought. Too much thought. But for now, as the captain stepped forward, drawing back the big club for the kill, Rube didn't think. He sat up and launched the big harpoon like a man born to it. He'd once played softball, once thrown a javelin, and this was not much different. Except this dug its way into the captain's stomach, right below the ribcage. The big steel end made a deep sound, like an animal sucking at meat. The shank

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quivered from the captain like an exclamation point as Rube scrambled to his feet. He stood there watching the captain grab at the wooden shank. The captain's face beaded with sweat. Muscles spasmed, and then blood spurted form the captain's mouth.

"She wanted it all. By damn, no!" and he crumpled onto the deck.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat."

And Rube still didn't really know what the captain had done. But he knelt beside him, shaking him with horror and revulsion.

The captain curled around the shank, as though it gave him comfort.

"Did you kill her?" Rube realized he was screaming.

No answer. Maybe a slight grin at the corner of the old man's mouth? The captain died curled tightly around the shank of the harpoon.

Rube stood and tottered toward the pilothouse. There was some kind of automatic pilot, and Rube didn't want to mess with it. He found the radio and got that working easily enough. A shoreside operator mumbled from the receiver.

"Get me Sheriff Boggert," Rube said. "It's an emergency. Wake him up if you have to. And I need to know how to drive this boat."

They sat in the stinky, newly painted room. Alone finally. There had been many people buzzing about and many questions. But not enough answers, Rube thought. Though what he had would have to do.

Boggert looked as fierce as a bulldog who'd lost his last fight. "If you'd a just waited," Boggert said, "I was gettin' on out to talk to the man. But I didn't have the damned report yet."

"If I'd waited, the dog would be dead."

Boggert just stared. "Oh for Christ's sake." He paused. "Then again, you can't be sure of even that."

Rube was too tired to hear it. But he knew he would.

"Maybe if you hadn't let that dog up to the cemetery, well—maybe he'd a gone on home. Or to someone's home. Or . . ."

Rube stood up. "Are you through with me?"

Boggert scratched at his leg. "Just about, yeah. Come sign this affidavit."

The sun was up, hard and bright, as Boggert drove Rube home. "You get some sleep, Rube. It's been a hard day and night."

"For a tourist?" Rube said.

"For anyone," Boggert said.

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They drove up Main, trying not to hit the new day's tourists.

"It was self-defense, Rube. We matched the harpoon wound with one from the rack."

Rube was horrified for just a moment. "Not the one I killed the captain with?"

"No," Boggert said. "A different one. The captain was from a long line of oldtime whalers. Guess he kept them as—memories."

"Memories," Rube muttered, knowing he now had too many.

"Well, the old man was bonkers. No doubt about that. Betty had broken up with Jesse—some big fight over money—and Jesse, he just couldn't handle it. The old man found him hanging in a cheap hotel room."

"Memories," Rube muttered.

"And then she must have braced the old man for money. Probably said Jesse had promised her half the business. It fits, Rube."

"I guess," Rube said.

They stopped at a crosswalk, the closest thing in town to a real stoplight.

"And he was gonna kill the dog and you and drop you over the side."

"Dropping me over the side would have been enough," Rube said. "I can't swim."

Boggert shook his head. "Maybe you are a tourist, after all."

They pulled up in front of Rube's driveway, a winding stretch of asphalt that led to the house in back.

Rube got out. Opened the car's back door and called.

"Come on, Buddy."

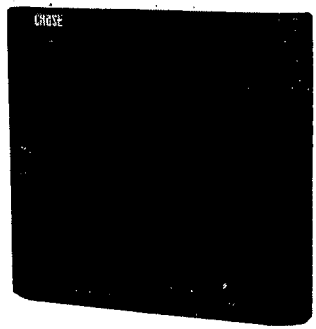
The big old dog had a bandage on his head, but he stuck out a giant tongue and licked at Rube's hand, then jumped down from the back of the Jeep and started to follow Rube to the house.

Rube had a garden to start, things to plant. Maybe something good and green would grow. Maybe something green and alive.

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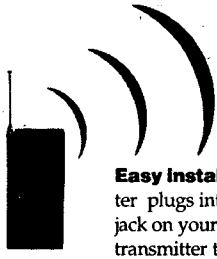
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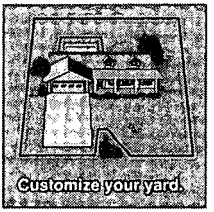
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Postscript

by Michelle Knowlden

Dear Mom,

That was rotten—sending me to the Brewster family reunion, knowing Tom and Emily would be there. You promised me a pleasant June in Kansas, and a journey back to a childhood of Gramps' drugstore and fireflies at dusk.

I bet you thought it would do me good, getting over Tom once and for all, right? Well, the joke's on you, Mom. Tom died two days after arriving. His ulcer acted up, and he bled to death. Satisfied?

And then I had to put up with the relatives, giving me sympathetic looks. Honestly, Mom, I haven't thought of Tom Killian in years. That broken engagement gave me time to finish my MBA and start a business. If I'd married Tom, would I have a string of Adventure Unlimited stores? Would I have traveled four continents, sailed the Black Sea—following an egret from dawn to dusk? No—I'd be a widow, with photo albums and recipe books.

And Tom got what he deserved with Emily. She was a secretive one, with a streak of malice. Since we were kids, she's lied about her Brewster blood—let everyone believe she was my first cousin when she was an adopted child of a third. I felt more kinship with your poodles. She played the angelic child with adults, but she flushed my guppies down the toilet when her mother wouldn't let her have one. She poured bleach on Kate's begonias when her own died. She poisoned the principal's cat when I made the dean's list.

When I was in college, she gave Tom, *my* fiancé, that look of hers. You know, the one we called her Emily Dickinson smile? Obscure but full of sly meaning. She followed Tom around his dad's furniture store. She tossed her mousy hair and gave him slavish looks. She flattered him beyond his worth. She made him brownies from scratch, and sent him a homemade birthday card.

Okay, so I can't make butterscotch chocolate chip brownies. If there was a mix for it, I'd give it a try. Okay, so I forgot his birthday. Big deal. But Emily took advantage of his hurt feelings and manipulated him into breaking our engagement. You know the rest. They married six months later.

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Oh, maybe it did hurt at first. More ego than heartache, I suspect. Still, he was the boyfriend of college days, when dreams ran true, and always smelled of spring. Whenever I think of hand holding, and cloud watching, and sharing a banana shake at Gramps' drugstore, I think of Tom. Whenever a parade marches down a small village street or when they hang up the first Christmas banner, I remember the way I looked reflected in his sunglasses. And I think of him standing near the holly at the old house on Stetler Street. And how I could smell late blooming jasmine when he said he was marrying Emily, not me.

But let's be honest. Marrying Tom would have been worse than Purgatory—it would have been hell. He liked that whole business of the little woman at home, meeting him at the door with the evening newspaper and slippers. Can you imagine me in an apron? Spending my time in dress shops and salons, trying to look good for my man? Please. Emily's the one who got the short deal.

I wondered that first night of the reunion if she regretted it in the end. Fifteen years later, Tom had put on weight, and his eyes—those lovely blue eyes—were puffy with fatigue and failure. I can't tell you how happy I was to see how dreadful he looked.

He was drunk at the cocktail party, him with an ulcer, and wouldn't leave me alone. Kept saying how sorry *he* was. Wished things had turned out different. Wished he hadn't given me up. Good for the ego, but sickening under the circumstances. Emily retrieved him, giving me black looks. Remembering her awful temper, I hoped there wouldn't be a scene.

While she chatted, her face remained rigidly pleasant the whole evening. She was as socially disciplined as her oft touched up hair. Knowing her as we do, don't you wonder at the fury that whirred beneath the forced charm?

Reflecting on the guppies and begonias, I had a curious thought. Perhaps she murdered him with salsa or slipped lemon into his tea. Something acidic to tear that ulcer open. That night, alone in their hotel room, he died.

I wonder if he suffered.

They buried him yesterday. It was a sunny day, almost too warm to wear black. Emily looked smarter than a boutique mannequin. While we were praying, something made me look up. Emily was staring at the casket, smiling her Emily Dickinson smile.

After the funeral, Aunt Celia had a reception for the mourners. Emily sat near me and talked about Tom's dad—about the furni-

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ture store that smelled of wood shavings and beeswax. It burned down recently—had you heard? Then she dwindled to silence, and I thought maybe my notion of murder was woven from nothing. Maybe she did grieve for Tom.

"Remember the Christmas play our junior year?" she asked presently. "You played the part of the Christmas angel, and wore a holly wreath in your hair."

"I sure do," I said. "That wreath scratched something fierce."

"Thomas never forgot it either. He planted a holly bush near the front door of our house, and every Christmas he made a wreath for the angel at the top of our Christmas tree. Once I found him standing in the yard, stroking a sprig of holly. He had a faraway look in his eyes, and I knew he was thinking of you."

"Now, Emily," I said, uneasily. "Just nostalgia for our childhood, I'm sure. After all, he married you."

"Never mind," she said, patting my hand. "It's over now. Let me get you another brownie. I made them myself."

Guess you're right, Mom. I'm getting too old for all that sweet stuff. Stomach sure is bothering me today. Aunt Celia told Emily, who came over first thing this morning with a pitcher of milk.

"Cousin," she said, when I opened the door. "I heard you were sick. Let me take care of you." And she smiled her poet's smile.

P.S. By the way, I didn't drink any of the milk. Only pretended to sip, not wanting to hurt her feelings. You know how I hate the stuff. I made her eat the rest of the brownies. Told her I baked them fresh, but they were Emily's own left over from the reception. I couldn't have her thinking I hadn't collected *any* womanly skills in the last fifteen years. She ate four more than I did and left a few hours ago, looking pale.

I'm much recovered myself. This evening I called to invite Emily for a walk beneath the walnut trees, and to listen to the cicadas sing. She didn't answer the phone, which the hotel clerk thought strange—no one had seen her leave her room.

I'll call again later. But first I think I'll wander by the old house. And maybe leave a spray of holly on Tom's grave.

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A Train of Stars

by Dan Crawford

So we were off in a flurry of music, the scream of the train whistle, and the roars of the crowd. It gave me a dreadful headache, and there was all that fan mail to sort yet.

Our fan mail was hauled out to us at every whistlestop along the tour, big canvas bags bulging with envelopes. They dumped it out on a table, if there was a table: big stacks for the big names, little heaps for those players who fill in the gaps between kiss scenes and murders. But when the train pulled out again, we peons got *all* the fan mail. In all the hoopla, it got mixed up, see, so we had to sort it again and throw away the envelopes that were kind of grimy and load it all back into the proper canvas bags so it could be presented to us again at the next stop.

We had to write a lot of the letters, too, if the bags started getting empty. I liked to think of it as creating scrap for the next paper drive.

"Brrr," said Olivia, when we were far enough from town to start moving from the rear platform back into the train. We had started this bond drive just after New Year's, wearing fur coats issued by Wardrobe to make us look prosperous. But the vice presidents with us quickly decided we'd be more popular in our own cloth coats. That was supposed to show we were just folks, after all, and also making sacrifices for our boys Over There.

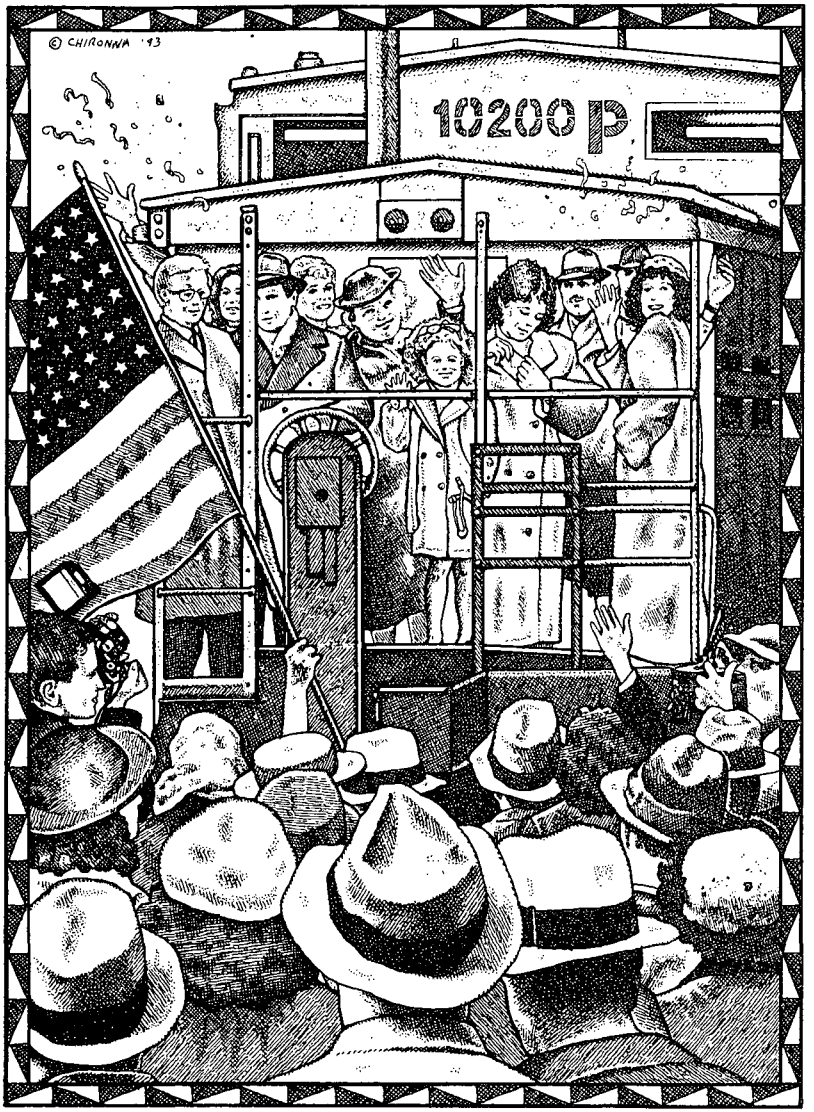
This fooled nobody. In one town I heard a fan growl, *"They* don't know about stretching a pound of butter over a whole month."

She was right, too. I know nothing about it because I haven't bought a whole pound of butter at one time since 1935.

Anyway, as the least of the attractions, we were allowed to sneak off the platform first, collect our suppers, and carry them away to the club car so we could sort mail while we ate. We met George at the door of the car. He scowled but opened it for us and then grumbled away.

"My hands are still freezing," Olivia said, squeezing among

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I SLIPPED OUT THE SUGAR BOWL WARNING I'D TRANSFERRED TO THE POCKET OF THIS COAT WHEN I'D CHANGED, JUST IN CASE IT WAS AN IMPORTANT CLUE.

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mailbags to sit at our usual table.

"I just dip mine in the gravy," I told her. "That stuff has to be good for something."

"Oh, Myrna!" Velvet slid on a fallen letter and had to put a hand on the table to balance herself. We're a little too smart for that; Olivia relieved her of the bread she had pulled off Sissy's plate when her hand came down.

Velvet flashed all her teeth but said nothing. We'd only just started talking to Velvet again this month. She never returned the bridal shower gifts we gave her, even after the groom's lawyer found a loophole and called off the wedding.

"Careful," I told Olivia. "You're dripping gravy on that letter."

She pushed it out of the way and set her plate down. "Just one of Eloise's. She'll never run short."

"Ooh!" exclaimed Sissy. There is no way to look another direction when Sissy cries, "Ooh!"

"What?" I asked.

"I know what I was going to tell you." She sat down with a little bounce. "Knock knock."

"No," said Velvet.

Two little lines developed in Sissy's brow. "Wait," she commanded. "I don't think that's what you're supposed to say." She thought about it. "You have to say, 'Who's there?' "

"I won't," Velvet informed her.

"It's not that hard," said Sissy earnestly.

"Listen," Velvet replied, leaning over her plate. "Those jokes are dead, and you never learned to tell them even when they were alive. It just never works."

Sissy had been listening intently. When Velvet paused, she realized some reply was expected of her. "What?" she said.

"When you say 'Knock knock.' "

"Who's there?" Sissy asked, interested.

Velvet put a hand on her forehead. "I give up."

"I don't get it." Sissy turned to me, opening wide those limpid eyes that made her a star at seven in *Tender Kisses* and would have made her a star again twenty times over in the years since. Only she's handled by Cal, who couldn't get Mickey Mouse a job at Disney.

Before I could answer, Olivia, more to change the subject than anything else, brushed the gravy from the envelope and said, "We'd better be grateful to Eloise; without her, we couldn't afford to do all this pleasure traveling."

The train jerked, nearly slopping all the gravy onto the let-

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ters. "You did say pleasure?" asked Velvet.

It was a so-so train, suited to our so-so studio, but at least it had fuel, since a bond drive is considered war work. If we sold more in bonds than the government spent in coal, it might make a certain amount of sense. But the coal was the extent of the government's interest; the amenities were straight Mammoth Titan standard issue. The food was canteen stuff: a certain amount of gravy with a few lumps under it to keep us wondering. Edwin usually added something from his private stock and just drank supper.

"I think we're sitting again," noted Olivia, listening.

"I don't like to eat standing up," Sissy told her. We didn't reply, realizing it was time to start eating before the gravy congealed. The train made lots of stops to let freight trains get by. We did hope the freight was something to be dropped on the Axis, and not shoes for Gloria Swanson.

But there were people having less fun in this war, so we sipped our main course and grumbled just a little. Even our sufferings were third rate; it's the Mammoth Titan way.

Mammoth Titan had assembled us, a collection of stars (that is, those few Mammoth Titan players that people might recognize plus those of us who weren't recognizable but were nice to look at), publicity flacks, and hangers-on to urge the citizenry to do right by Our Boys and Uncle Sam. We got no money for this—our duty—but we did get the free ride and all the gravy we could stomach.

I was there because Cal said he'd gotten me the part of the threatened peasant girl in *Night of Dr. Jekyll,* never mentioning that this trip was part of the fine print. I was a real catch. Not only had I done a lot of work for Mammoth Titan (through no fault of my own) but I could play the piccolo part of "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

See, there was only so much train to go around, so the president hated to put a band on board, too. There was usually some kind of reception band in the towns where we stopped, but anyone on board who intended to sing had to have an ensemble they could depend on. This also cut down on the number of cars on the train, the amount of coal, and so forth; the president can be very patriotic when it involves being cheap. We were all pulling together to knock down Mussolini. Only he was doing it from his office back home, and we

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were doing it on the road. Gee, I'd have gone to my music lessons more willingly as a kid if I'd known that one day I'd be using my piccolo to smash Panzers.

Of course, everybody with any claim to stardom demanded a private Pullman. The president announced first that private cars would go only to those of his stars whose Mammoth Titan careers had netted a minimum of a million dollars for the studio. We've been around too long to fall for that; we argued him down to four hundred thousand. Even then, only one Mammoth Titan performer qualified. She hadn't even applied for the private car. But her mother saw to it that she got one.

George shoved mailbags aside with his feet as he carried two trays of "food" down the center aisle. Mrs. Marr came after him, dragging The Child Star along behind. We all sat up a little, and smiled. Mrs. Marr had much to say in the casting of Baby Eloise films.

"Good ovation, wasn't it, Eloise?" asked Olivia.

"Nice crowd," Velvet agreed. "They loved you."

The Child Star blinked. "Yes," she said.

Baby Eloise was a moonfaced ten-year-old with a voice like an angel, dimples to make combat veterans weep in their foxholes, and a smile that would melt Hitler's heart. She displayed none of these for us; chirps and charm are rationed for use in movies like *Baby Eloise Beats the Saboteurs.*

Mrs. Marr moved on behind George, the two of them vying for the deepest scowl. "I should ask her about my children's book," murmured Sissy. "She's a children."

"You're writing a book?" Olivia inquired, eyes opening almost as wide as Sissy's.

"A children's book," she repeated. *"The Teddy Who Wanted to Be a Bear."*

Velvet stirred her supper a little with a fork. "No problem," she said. "Just take off the teddy."

Sissy's head went back a little as she tried to figure this out. "Oh!" she exclaimed, finally. "Velvet, you have such a one-piece mind!"

Mrs. Marr, at the end of the club car, heard this and sniffed. We were not, obviously, fit to associate with The Child Star. George got the door open somehow, and they disappeared into their private coach.

As a matter of fact, we aren't fit to associate with The Child Star. We're known as starlets, but that's courtesy; we've been starlets since talkies came in. What we really do around town

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is get photographed, primarily from the neck down. More marketable faces are pasted over ours, so that anyone who can act but has what the wardrobe mistress calls "figure deficiencies," and which the president describes more flatly, need not disappoint her fans when she's on a magazine cover.

Oh, I could tell you who pads more than her shoulders, and who has me standing in for her in those pictures on barracks walls. But I won't because eating regular is addictive and I've got the habit bad. I'll save it all for my autobiography, *Beauty and the Bust*. But you'll have to wait until anyone who can sue me is dead. By that time, anybody who'd be interested will have kicked off, too, so you may never find out.

Anyhow, in return for the way we stick our chests out, we're allowed to call ourselves actresses and stroll around the ranch house in those Western fillers. Sometimes men with monocles or buck teeth tie us to fiendish devices. Most recently, I had played the romantic interest of a ventriloquist's dummy in the serial *Cal Ryder and the Hidden Voice*. But I spend most of my professional life lounging around in a velvet bathing suit.

Laszlo and Jim, two men who deal in these pictures for Mammoth Titan, entered with their own saucers of gravy. Jim set his down on the table across the aisle, and lit a Fleetwood. He liked a little cigarette ash in his gravy: good training for army food, he said. I don't know if the military will get desperate enough to take him.

He blew the smoke at me and intoned, "Ya eedmo Ob-Ararat!"

"Thank you," I said. "Rehearsing my lines will take my mind off what I'm eating. Think they're really going to make that Jekyll movie, Laszlo?"

Laszlo scowled; he's important enough that jokes about the studio are subversion, to him. "You want to walk home?" he demanded.

"I don't want to go home at all," I told him. "I have to pay for the gravy there."

The conductor bustled back through the car. George was so perfect he could have been supplied by Casting: white hair, little white mustache, uniform polished and in perfect repair. But he came with the train. He was a Railroad Man to the bone, with forty years' service. His only flaw was that he hated people—movie people, anyway. Not that movie people gave him lots of encouragement to change his mind.

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"Be a doll, George, and take this back, would you?" drawled Velvet, pushing her plate at him.

He dodged it, not even looking at her, and rolled along, grumbling, " 'Fetch salt and pepper, take my plate.' Be rinsing out their step-ins for 'em next."

"Hey, I *charge* for that!" Velvet called after him.

The only person George ever accommodated was The Child Star. Jim figured it was because she was the only real star on the train, but I thought George just took her youth into account. He assumed she'd grow out of this movie business and get into honest work.

"Don't you agree with me in that tone of voice!"

The sound of the penalty for agreeing with Mrs. Marr rang through the club car not once but several times. It should have warmed the cockles of my heart, but we just sort of lowered our heads and ate faster. We had been through this all before.

"Is she whacking The Child Star again?" inquired the refined tones of Jewell deChante, entering the car a step ahead of George and his salt and pepper shakers. "Let's throw them both off the train, huh? Peace in our time?"

Aside from the crime of having the train's only private car, Mrs. Marr had snubbed Jewell more than once. And, after all, Jewell was the ranking grown-up star in the excursion. We knew this was so, for Jewell had admitted it herself. (She did not admit that she needed this trip, as she was having a difficult war. She had specialized in exotic vamps and was now considered too foreign-looking to play homegrown heroines and too sinister for the heroines of the Resistance.)

She was really much too important to be seen talking to us, but for the moment we were united against a common enemy. She glanced down at the letters all around us.

"I've been meaning to talk to you girls about the letters I've been receiving. Is there room for me at your table?"

She called us "girls" only when she wanted something. Olivia leaned back. "There isn't even room for you in that dress."

Jewell deChante could frown without wrinkling her pretty face, though time was taking care of that for her. She lifted one nostril and moved on, preferring to dine alone in our sleeping car.

"That Women's Auxiliary Army Corps could start drafting people around here," noted

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Velvet, wiping some gravy off the table with one of Jewell's letters.

"They'd get us instead," I told her. "She's over age."

"Didn't I see Jewell come in?"

Bevis Flint was your standard hero player, with a face so square and solid it must have hurt to move it. His rock solid muscles made for great pictures at every stop: he picked up a couple of local kids on each arm. He carried two plates of gravy, one of them for Edwin Lorenzo, who strolled in behind him. This made up our usual crowd, the poker crowd. The pinochle crowd ate in the dining car.

"To change her dress, I think," Sissy told him. "There wasn't any room at the table, so she went to put on a different dress."

This made no sense, but perhaps Bevis couldn't tell. He set Edwin's plate down and moved out of the car with his own.

"Oh yes," said Velvet, who had been sliding over to make room for him if he was so inclined. "How sad for her that she has to sleep in the same car as the nobodies."

"Maybe somebody can find her another place to sleep," Olivia suggested as the door closed behind Bevis.

"Ladies, mind your innuendo. There are gentlemen in this car."

I looked up and down the car and didn't spot any, which I pointed out to Edwin. He raised his chin, the way he did. Edwin was a veteran of rolling voice and grandfatherly mien, generally found playing judges, congressmen, and crusty old generals. He was a very important person on this trip as well, for he carried the cards.

The battered deck hit the table, followed by two immense rolls of greenbacks. He slid a fifty from one of these, lit it from Jim's cigarette, and then lit his own coffin nail. The money was from Props, for display purposes when we gave our little presentation on how much more valuable a stack of war bonds was. This did not make the poker played with it any less cutthroat.

The money slid back and forth while they swapped cards and we cleared away our gravy and dealt out the mail. News both profound and obscure passed between our tables, names like Rommel and Marshall mixed with Buster Wiles, Fred McEvoy, and Betty Hansen.

Bevis came back. Velvet went to chat for a minute and stayed to play some cards, though I didn't notice that she was betting any money. Edwin got up at least once, to fetch a bottle from his private stock.

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Actually, I think everybody left the car at least once; maybe it was the gravy. Laszlo went out and came back six or seven times; he liked to move around to show that his supervision was required at every second.

I wasn't really taking notes, being busy composing a fan letter to myself from a kid in Omaha. It didn't seem important until The Child Star poked her head into the car, lifted an eyebrow, and announced, in a voice as flat as the landscape outside, "Mother hasn't had much to drink yet, but I can't wake her up."

We did carry a doctor. He was insurance for the studio; kept any of us from going out before the public sniffling or sneezing, or, more likely, suffering hangovers or indigestion. Sissy ran to fetch him. The Child Star waited quietly, without much interest, at the door between the club car and her private boudoir.

The rest of us went back to our own business. Mrs. Marr, we all knew very well by now, was something of a heavy tippler. She tended to get louder as the night went on, rather than quieter, but we thought God might be on our side tonight, if He had any attention to spare from the front lines. Dr. Stone grumbled his way through our car; he had obviously been doing well at pinochle when interrupted.

"I," said Edwin Lorenzo, "am going to sing a song." He drained his glass and refilled it from the bottle in his vest pocket.

"Is it clean?" inquired Olivia as the door thumped shut behind Dr. Stone, with Baby Eloise following along.

"Nobody I know thinks so," he said. He straightened his shoulders and thumped his chest a little to prepare it for exertion.

Dr. Stone came back and bent over Laszlo. Laszlo tossed his cards down and went out with him. He didn't like Mrs. Marr any more than the rest of us. "If she's torn up another carpet . . . " he muttered.

If he got into a fight with Mrs. Marr, it was a fifty-fifty proposition which one would be walking home. Mrs. Marr was mother to a star, but Laszlo was somebody's nephew. When no shouting came from the private car, we settled back to listen to Edwin Lorenzo's recital and pretended to blush.

He had finished his first song and was starting in on "King Caractacus" when Laszlo came back. After a whispered conversation with Jim, the two of them started for The Child

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Star's car. Laszlo, though, paused at our table.

"Better have you, too." He pointed to me and to Sissy. "You and, um, you."

I looked to Velvet and Olivia, exchanged shrugs with them, and got up to follow.

It was a very nice car, with actual beds instead of bunks and curtains at the windows. Mrs. Marr was sprawled in a big horsehair armchair, a half-empty bottle on a low table beside her. I didn't see a glass.

Sissy missed something else. "Where's Baby Eloise?" she demanded.

"We sent her into the next car," said Dr. Stone, jerking his head in that direction. "She doesn't know yet."

"Is Mrs. Marr really that sick?" I asked.

"Officially," said Laszlo, "Yes."

"Unofficially?" asked Jim.

"She's dead," said Dr. Stone.

We all took two giant steps back from the chair without saying, "Captain, may I?" "Food poisoning," growled Laszlo. "You'd think, in this weather, they could keep the food . . . "

Dr. Stone sat down on the nearer bed. "That can be the official story, if you like. It was less accidental poisoning, though. Somebody slipped a bottle of rubbing alcohol into her. Know where she got her liquor?"

"I wonder if she deals with the same place as Lorenzo," mused Jim, always interested in these practical matters.

Laszlo leaned in, his hands flat on one arm of the chair. "You couldn't have made a mistake?"

"Not after working Hollywood all through Prohibition, no." Dr. Stone jerked a thumb at the bottle. "And unless some of the old bootleggers are back in business, to get around rationing, we can't blame them this time. It must have been deliberate. She had plenty of drinking alcohol, too much for her to try this instead."

Sissy's lower lip slid out a little. "Poor Baby Eloise. What's she going to do without her mother? You know, if it weren't for mothers, we wouldn't be here at all. And then who would we talk to?"

"Is The Child Star going to have to go home?" I asked.

Laszlo turned on me, glad of someone he could holler at. "Don't you remember why she got this private car?" he demanded, shaking three fingers at me. "She's the only one of you with crowd appeal! We need her if we're going to finish this trip, and we've got to finish the trip or explain to the gov-

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ernment, in triplicate, why we wasted their time and coal."

"She can't travel alone, can she?" Jim demanded.

"Of course not!" Laszlo whirled to shake fingers at him now. "That's why I cast these two as substitute mothers!"

"I beg your pardon?" I inquired.

"Ooh!" said Sissy. "We can be mommies?"

"It sounds like one of the tougher roles we've been offered," I said. "We're still too young for the mother parts."

"Simplest thing in the world," Laszlo informed me. "All women have natural maternal instincts. Well, most." He took a step back from the deceased but said no more about that. It's a rule in our town: never speak ill of the dead . . . as long as there's a chance you'll be picked up for the murder.

I had some doubts about my natural maternal instincts, but when I started to say so, he went on, with those eyes they issue to petty bureaucrats, "That part in *Night of Dr. Jekyll* is rather motherly; I hope we haven't been guilty of miscasting."

"Who's going to tell Eloise?" Sissy demanded.

"You do that," our man of decision told her. He jerked a thumb at me. "She can pack your things while you do it; you seem to have more natural instincts."

"Pack?" Sissy asked.

"You're going to have to move in here for the duration of the trip," Laszlo said.

"Ooh, goody!" Sissy clapped her hands. "Be sure to bring my book while I . . . what was I doing?"

I thought about objecting. Not that I wanted to console The Child Star myself. I just didn't especially want to have to console Sissy after she did it. But murder upsets Laszlo, and I might easily find myself dropped from the trip, and the company payroll, at the next stop.

Velvet and Olivia were watching from the club car side of the door. When I turned for our sleeping quarters instead, they came charging after me. Velvet's eyes glittered when she saw me start repacking my suitcase.

"I told you not to write all those things about Jewell in that fan letter," she said. "I do hope they're giving you train-fare home. You'd have a terrible time charming the money out of yokels."

"Oh, I don't know," I told her. "I've already charmed Laszlo into giving me a semiprivate car."

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Velvet's expression made it all worthwhile. "What?"

Not knowing how much Laszlo wanted to get around, I said, "Mrs. Marr's the one who's leaving. Sissy and I are going to escort The Child Star the rest of the way."

"You?" snarled Velvet. "Why you?"

"My natural maternal instincts," I informed her.

"Oh well," said Olivia. "That'll give us a lot more room. And I'd rather sleep in a bunk here than babysit."

Velvet was showing her front teeth, but she pretended to take this as consolation. "True. I wonder if this will change the panty raid they had on for tonight. I was counting on the . . . publicity."

"Yes, if you don't get a boost soon, you'll have to put all the pins back in your clothes," said Olivia.

While Velvet indignantly declared that she had never worked as a stripper and certainly never would again, I packed up Sissy's things as well. Then I snagged our conductor. "Be a darling and carry these to The Child Star's car, George," I said.

George was not inclined to be a darling and didn't think much of carrying luggage. He was a man in uniform. He did, however, open the door for me between cars while I wrestled the suitcases through. I knew what I would find in The Child Star's boudoir and braced myself.

Sissy was wailing, "And without my mamma I'd never have met Daddy." She knelt with her arms around The Child Star.

The Child Star, who had bawled so affectingly over a sick canary in *Viva Baby Eloise* that four patrons had to be carried griefstricken from the theater, was proving that that stuff was saved for the set. She didn't try to move, or to stem the flow of Sissy's mourning. Her expression was that of someone willing to wait out the storm.

I set down the suitcases and jerked my head toward Mrs. Marr's chair. "They took her out," The Child Star told me.

I raised an eyebrow. She shrugged. "She was useful to me. But there are plenty of mothers."

Sissy was trying to pat away The Child Star's tears, of which there were none. "Oh," she sobbed, "lots of people in our town are mothers, but you only get one of your very own."

"Oh, her," said The Child Star. "She still lives in Fayette."

"Who was Mrs. Marr, then?" I asked.

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"I forget. They told me. Dad's brother's wife's mother or something. Where are we all going to sleep?"

Very practical, these child stars. Well, some child stars. I could not see this one growing up to be like Sissy, who had enchanted audiences with her dimples and her curls in a good dozen movies with lots of tap dancing, just a couple of years too early for her to be any challenge to Shirley Temple. (Maybe I can reveal some backstage secrets without putting Hedda's nose out of joint. The curls and dimples were real; the tap dancing was phony. They got another girl in for the closeups of the feet. I don't know what genius decided to make tap dancing movies before sound came in, anyhow.)

Technically speaking, for that matter, I had been a child star myself. After several years of background bits (if your church group rents *King of Kings,* I can tell you where to find me way in the back, but don't blink), I was awarded my first starring role at fourteen. We did not mention to the studio that I was fourteen because they had estimated three years older than that. Talkies were still so new that they were desperate for people who could sing. My parents said I could, and it took the studio seven "Sister Annette" shorts to learn different.

Mrs. Marr's bed was big enough for the two of us, and it was no real problem to decide, but I let Sissy figure it all out. This gave her something else to think about. The Child Star showed us where we could put our things, but since Mrs. Marr's things were still in those places, we left ours in the suitcases. Except for one flannel nightgown apiece, which we put on. The Child Star donned a similar garment, and we all settled in for the night.

I was unsettled some hours later by a shrill scream. Sissy does not scream in her sleep, so I knew who it had to be. I turned on the little bedside light and found The Child Star sitting up in bed.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That's all right," I told her. "I ought to know better than to be sleeping at two A.M. anyhow. Are you all right?"

The Child Star sighed. "I'm afraid I'll have to change."

I knew the drill; I had little sisters. Get the blankets off before they're soaked through, toss the sheets into a separate pile, and so forth. While I was doing this, I thought The Child Star was fetching another nightgown. Instead she brought me a long-handled bath brush.

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"I don't think we'd better run a bath at this hour," I told her, checking the pillowcases.

Grave eyes studied me. "Look," I said. "In the morning . . . "

"This isn't a bathing brush," she informed me. She set it on the bed and then placed her hands palms down on the mattress, presenting to me the most appalling collections of welts and bruises.

I got the idea. "You'll have to excuse me," I said. "We don't want to wake up Sissy."

An entire Panzer division couldn't wake up Sissy. But The Child Star didn't know that. So she shrugged and went off in search of a nightgown, leaving the brush in case I changed my mind, adults being unpredictable.

"Are there clean sheets?" I asked her when she returned.

The Child Star shook her head. "Not until morning."

"You'd better bunk with us, then," I said, doing my best to make this sound pleasant. "We'll . . . "

There was a rap at the door. I looked around for a robe, snatched up one of Mrs. Marr's, and went to see who it was.

It was nobody. But nobody had left us a message. A piece of paper with a skull and crossbones above the word "Beware" had been tacked to the door.

"Isn't this a lovely breakfast?" cried Sissy, carrying the tray back to the table.

"Oh yes."

It was one of the least positive affirmatives I'd ever heard. But perhaps The Child Star was not large enough to have Sissy's kind of appetite. And maybe she'd never had to go short, either.

The breakfast tray and supplies had been brought to our door by our loyal conductor and by Bevis Flint. George had charged off again, growling something about having work to do and if he'd known he'd be escorted he'd've let the so-and-so carry it all. But Bevis was inclined to stay and chat.

"I just wondered if you, um, needed an extra spoon," he said.

I had counted them on the way in, to be sure they hadn't sent the usual two-person breakfast. "No, you brought three spoons."

"Or, um, an extra knife," he went on, sort of twisting his head to one side.

"No," I told him, keeping my eyes on his face. "We have three knives."

"Or maybe an extra fork."

Behind me, an equally useful conversation was going on. "Knock knock," said Sissy.

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The Child Star responded with "Who's there?" on cue.

"Elephant."

"Elephant who?"

"I don't know. I've never been introduced to an elephant. So Buster climbs out on the castle roof . . . "

Sissy had been trying to explain the story of Buster Kitten, another one of her children's books, all morning. Sissy gets a little tangled when it comes to plots: hers generally involve small animals that beg for wieners and table scraps at the back door and then ride off on horses to defeat giants. The Child Star had listened gravely through all this because she had been taught to listen to adults and because she had noticed Sissy had rather muscular arms.

Bevis also had muscle, both physical and box office, but not so much that I felt compelled to go through breakfast inventory with him. "If we need anything," I said, "I'll give you a call." I closed the door on the foot he kept trying to slip in.

I had just reached the breakfast on the table when that same door was knocked upon. Mrs. Marr would have thrown something, but I have no children to sell the studio so I answered it.

"Hi," said Jim, carrying a much smaller breakfast. He was followed into the room by Olivia and Velvet, whose eyes turned rounder than usual at the sight of what was being served to those of us in the private cars.

The Child Star rose with her bowl of cereal and moved to a side table without being asked. Sissy, perhaps to her dismay, followed. But The Child Star's face registered no complaint.

"I know what happened," Jim whispered, taking Sissy's seat.

Olivia pulled up my chair. "Richard Hannay here has it all figured out."

Sissy and The Child Star had taken their breakfasts with them, so mine was the only one left to prey on. I hauled up a chair without any ceremony. Jim interpreted this as a sign of intense desire to learn what he'd deduced.

"Mrs. Marr," he said in even lower tones, "was murdered by Nazi spies."

I spread imitation butter on my toast. "You don't mean to say so."

He nodded. "We have a chance to expose their fiendish plot and become heroes. You could be another Mata Hari."

Velvet choked on the thought. "Yes." I said. "Shot her, didn't they?"

"I've already found their code book." He reached into a pocket

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and brought out a little black rectangle. "It's filled with mysterious references to their agents. Look here. 'Joshua Red 324. Nathaniel Blue 918'."

Velvet reared and snatched the book from his hands. "That's mine! Those are telephone numbers!"

"Definitely not a matter for the FBI," Olivia agreed. "The Health Department, maybe."

"Oh well," said Jim, reaching for a cup of brown hot water. "I . . . what's this?"

It was too late, that's what it was. "Oh, just a crank note," I said. "It was tacked to the door. It's nothing." I tried to pry it from his hands.

But his eyes were gleaming. "That proves it," he said. "At least one of the people on this train is a spy and killed Mrs. Marr and wants to keep us from investigating it. I saw just this kind of note used in *The Spy Express*. We'll have to investigate them."

"There are better than forty people on this train," Olivia noted.

"We'll check the movie people," Jim decided, reaching for the plate of toast. "The train people could have had a wreck or something, but the movie people would've had to do it this way. It won't be hard. Didn't you see *Singapore Harbor*? We just have to look for someone with a swastika in his suitcase."

"Mrs. Marr."

We hadn't seen Sissy wander over to the table to get the salt. "She had a swatsticka," the budding author went on. "She used it to swat poor Eloise."

Then she went away. Jim went on, "Or maybe a missing finger or a secret radio transmitter in disguise."

"What's a secret radio transmitter in disguise going to look like?" Velvet asked him.

"Actually, Sissy's got the right idea," said Olivia. "If this has anything to do with spies, then Mrs. Marr was the Nazi, and the murderer was one of our boys."

Jim's chin went up. "Our boys don't murder people."

"Spies or no spies," I said, "somebody did kill Mrs. Marr. It might be useful to know who."

Velvet scooped up the last of the imitation butter. "She wouldn't have let just anybody into her precious private car."

"Did she have to? Anybody could have slipped her the bottle, even in fun, not knowing the wood alcohol would kill her."

Jim raised a finger to indicate a point. "And the bad bottle was not one of hers. We checked. It was probably from Lorenzo's stock."

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"Well, he didn't do it," said Olivia. "It would take his mind off the cards."

"But he might have done it," Jim said, "under orders from Germany. Or somebody else could've taken a bottle he was throwing away and reused it."

"Maybe it was spies," said Olivia, wiping her lips. "I mean, why would anybody else kill Mrs. Marr? Except that she needed it, but so do lots of people. Why start with her?"

"Lorenzo and deChante have been in the business a long time," said Velvet. "They'd have just the type of mind that would resent Mrs. Marr's getting the private car."

Olivia raised an eyebrow at that but said, "Bevis was coming back this way a lot. Maybe he did it as a favor to one of them."

"But if you want someone who really would have liked to get Mrs. Marr out of the way," I put in, just to add two more cents to the pot, "she was probably a real embarrassment to the studio and Laszlo represents the studio."

"Well, I still say it's spies," Jim said, writing all this down in a handy pocket notebook. "But since that's four suspects and there's four of us, why don't let's investigate those four first?"

"There are lots more people . . . " I started to say.

"What about Bernie and Sylvester, up in the pinochle car?" Velvet demanded. "Or Annie, Kay, and Misty?"

This made us all sit back. You don't ever want to go talking about the wardrobe and makeup people; they prefer it the other way around, and there are little tricks they can do with color and arrangement that can make you look like change for a dime.

"Or either of you could have done it," Jim told her, "just to get a chance to have the private car yourself."

"But that way they'd have to have known Laszlo would look for someone with natural maternal instincts," I pointed out.

"Anyway," he went on, leaning so low over the table as to get crumbs from the toast plate on his chin, "I know it had to be someone from our car."

"How?" Olivia demanded.

"This note," he said, flipping it over. "It's written on the back of a Baby Eloise fan letter. From our bags."

I glanced back at The Child Star, who was studying every move of Sissy's lips as Buster Kitten brandished a pink feather duster and bright yellow lollipops in the face of the ogre.

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"Four of us and four of them," said our loyal spy smasher. "What do you say?"

"I'm game," said Olivia. "As long as I interrogate Bevis Flint."

"Hold it!" snarled Velvet. "You interview Lorenzo. You'll do lots better with someone your own age."

"We'll flip a coin," Olivia proposed, reaching for her purse. "Loser interviews deChante."

"Well, I'll tackle Laszlo," said Jim, making a note. "It won't be him, though. They'd be crazy to use someone with a foreign name. Except it did happen that way in *Count on the Renegades.*"

Someone knocked on the door. "It's unlocked!" called Jim, who had elected himself host.

"Oh, do come in," said Velvet, who had won the coin toss. (She'd been able to pull out a two-headed coin before Olivia could.) "We're not quite done yet, but wouldn't you like to come in and talk?"

Bevis would like. "Here." Velvet moved over to clear space on the little sofa. "We can sit right here and . . . "

But the stalwart hero had found his own seat, next to Sissy. "Kittens, huh?" he said, catching onto the conversation. "I used to have a kitten named Jenny."

"Kittens," muttered Velvet. She tossed her dishes onto the little tray. "Kittens!"

Her knife bumped the sugar bowl, which none of us had touched during the meal, not expecting much to come of it. But maybe Mrs. Marr had had connections in the kitchen. I picked up the lid.

Inside, all I found was a note saying "Beware." This one had been written on the back of a Baby Eloise envelope. I looked from it to Sissy and Bevis.

The Child Star's blank eyes met mine. I wadded the envelope into my hand.

I couldn't blame The Child Star for getting rid of her "mother." And I knew where my own career would go if I said anything. There was one thing I could do, though.

Baby Eloise never walked into any drugstore to buy a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and probably didn't snitch one of Lorenzo's empties. She was way too well supervised. Somebody had to have done these things for her; the bottle and the warning letters suggested it was somebody on this train. If I could find out who had done The Child Star these favors, maybe I could do something to get him or her off the train be-

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fore any of the rest of us looked expendable.

Lorenzo was no early riser; no rush to go interview him. I sat around to enjoy the fun as Velvet, with prompting from Jim and Olivia, tried to question Bevis. All they got out of the big, bold hero was a series of friendly but empty grunts. Bevis was a man of action—he had a Lone Ranger Pocket Book rolled into his back pocket—and he was breathing down Sissy's neck, all agog with the suspense of Buster Kitten's adventure.

Sissy was too busy to notice his attention or Velvet's reaction. She was taking notes as she told the story, having long ago departed from the text, making up new perils as she went along. She couldn't wait to find out what became of her hero.

The only person who lacked even imitation interest in the tale was the intended audience. The Child Star was slumped in her chair, occupied with a well-worn deck of cards and some obscure form of solitaire, flipping through the deck and mumbling to herself. Every now and then she'd let a card drop from the deck onto a stack of discards on her lap. When she reached the last card, she set it on top of this stack and started over.

They had been at this for better than an hour when I decided nothing much would happen if I slipped away. "Well," I said, "better get these dishes back or they'll think we've donated them for scrap."

"As opposed to the food," Olivia said, rising, "which we donated to the Axis."

"Yes," agreed Velvet, who did not stand up. "Why don't you take all the trash with you?" Her eyes threw flame at Sissy.

The rest of the cast was less moved by our departure. The Child Star sort of nodded and went on running through her cards. Bevis, now pretending an interest in her game, grunted, either in farewell or at the sight of a nine of diamonds. "Meow," said Sissy.

We moved out of our posh boudoir, along the external corridor, and to the end of the car. The dishes rattled as we bounced across the shaky three-foot landing that connected the cars. The train had had to be cobbled together from odds and ends of rolling stock the railroad had pulled out of mothballs, since all the good stuff was required for war work. The cars didn't exactly fit, varying in age by centuries, I think, in some spots, so they'd nailed up little platforms and

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shelters to bridge the awkward bits.

Lorenzo was alone in the club car, reading a dark brown book, a bottle and glass in front of him on the table. I glanced to Olivia, who nodded and took my share of the plates on through. I sat in a chair opposite the character actor. His book came down; his head and eyebrows went up. I couldn't see any signs of last night's drinking in his face.

"Laszlo wanted me to check and be sure we all have our stories straight in case somebody in this next burg asks about Mrs. Marr," I said, hoping Laszlo had not already passed this way.

He knew what I was talking about; the good news had spread quickly through the train last night. He took a drink. "And what is the story?"

"Mrs. Marr had an upset stomach after all the train riding and has gone home."

This improvised tale nearly failed. Lorenzo's head tipped back. "That seems strangely close to the truth for Laszlo. I expected something with more imagination."

I shrugged. "He may be too busy looking for the murderer to be up to his usual level. Probably to thank whoever it is. Mrs. Marr was a spell of bad weather in this business."

He took another drink and turned to me, his eyebrows raised but his eyelids lowered. "One gray cloud more or less in Southern California will not make much difference."

I laughed; he seemed to expect it. "We'd need a whole host of murderers to clear them all away," I said. "Did you . . . "

He had spread one hand across his chest, fingers splayed. "Clear them away?"

There was a touch of shock in his expression. Thinking he suspected me of taking personal credit for clearing Mrs. Marr away, I hurried to add, "Just clear away the real clouds: not the human ones."

"Those are the most important ones," he said, raising his head and shoulders to the level of a bust in a hall of fame. "For there are indeed lands that admire our cities, nor complain of the noise and ugly air. In the land of Suomintarin, where they watch the sun for signs of explosion, such reports as reach them from our side of the world receive great applause. You must know that in Suomintarin they believe that the sun rises each morning full of hope that this day will be different. But as the day passes, and the sun sees what evil men do each other, it burns hotter and hotter with rage. It is for this reason that afternoon is so

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much warmer than morning. As the sun's strength is spent with much fury, and his face turns red, he goes to bed to dream of another, a better, world, and to waken the morrow hoping that the dream was true and what he saw was a lie."

He rose half out of his seat. "And because they fear that one day the sun will explode from anger, as a man indeed may do whose temper rises beyond his body's ability to contain it, they in Suomintarin believe we are wizards of genius to hide our cities with smoky fog, that the sun cannot see what we do in them."

I stood there with my shoulders hanging slant and my mouth hanging open as he settled back down. He took another drink and said, "Seen Bevis? The games must go on."

"Um," I said. "Er, he's with Sissy."

"A little old for him, isn't she?"

We exchanged raised eyebrow stares. I am one year older than Sissy myself, which I assumed Lorenzo knew.

"Do you play the filthy game yourself?" he went on.

"Poker?" I said. "A little. Bridge is my sport."

He shrugged. "A pity. If Laszlo is too busy controlling rumors, I'll have to find one of the others to take his place. Not your Allotment Annie, however, I am far too old for the stakes she prefers."

"Last night," I said, "do you remember seeing anyone . . ."

"One moment." He extended a hand to George's sleeve as the conductor came down the aisle. "Have you seen any likely-looking cardplayers awake yet, my good man?"

George was nobody's good man. He paused long enough for a grunt and a growl and moved on. "I wouldn't wear that uniform sixteen hours a day if it chafed that much," Lorenzo noted.

Doors slammed simultaneously at opposite ends of the car. George was on his way out and Jewell deChante was on her way through. I gave way before her glower and looked down the aisle, avoiding her venomous glare. I was able to see Olivia stride in and throw herself into a seat.

"I'll go find out if Olivia's dying to lose play money to you cutthroats," I said as Jewell banged the exit open.

I'd lost interest in questioning Lorenzo. I couldn't see him doing The Child Star any favors. He had too little in the way of energy to bother, and too much in the way of brains to leave his own bottle behind if he had. In fact, he had con-

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jured up an unpleasant alternate theory. Someone—I was thinking of Velvet—could have used his bottle for the alcohol so the crime would be pinned on him, in revenge for some insult.

"How did you do?" I asked Olivia.

One corner of her mouth jerked up. "I'm still alive. I must have done all right."

Being alive seemed awfully significant just now. "Why? You think she did it?"

"I do not." Her nose wrinkled, as if invaded by a foul odor. "She could poison someone just by kissing 'em."

"Got a hangover this morning, does she?"

"That woman is a hangover." Olivia shrugged. "I didn't ask her any questions, if that's what you wanted to know. I'm losing interest in playing cops and robbers. Whoever bumped off Mrs. Marr did a favor, and if there's a chance he'll come back for the Queen of the Screen, I don't want to get in his way."

I tipped my head toward the far door. "She going back to the sleeper?"

"That's her private dining car, isn't it?"

As ranking actress, Jewell always shooed the rest of us out so she could dine in the sleeping car undistracted by underlings. We didn't linger there anyhow; our spot was in the club car, among the bags of bogus mail.

I set off for Jewell's boudoir, telling Lorenzo as I passed, "Keep your cards warm. I may find somebody yet."

The Child's Star's car had to be passed through first. I nearly banged into George as he hauled red, white, and blue bunting to be tacked into strategic places before we made our stop. At the door to my new bedroom, I paused to peek inside. The Child Star was still occupied with her game of solitaire; Sissy and Bevis were both trying to interest her in their drawings of bunnies. Velvet glanced back at the door and glared to see me. I ducked down the corridor and bounced across the platform to my former sleeping spot.

Jewell was sitting on Velvet's bed, scowling at breakfast. I cannot swear that this made it curdle faster. With a sigh, she set it aside and picked up a well-thumbed volume of *New Yorker* cartoons.

She didn't look up as I let the door shut behind me. "Morning," I said.

Her eyes lit up as they lit on me, and her pearlies parted. "Become lost," she enunciated.

Jewel and I had never been great buddies. In her first lead, in *Wagons to the Ivy League,* I

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was a funloving college girl who kicked her so she fell down. I put a little extra feeling into this on one take. She landed so perfectly asprawl, so open-mouthed with surprise, that the director not only kept it in but had us do it over four times for the still cameras. The stills made all the major magazines and did a lot for Jewell's visibility. All she remembered me for, though, was the kick.

Aside from some growling now and then, however, we'd gotten along so far, at least when I remembered to recognize her superior status. So I stopped at a respectful distance and said, "You didn't get to tell us what you wanted to about the letters yesterday."

She tossed the book up to the pillow on the bunk and pulled one leg up next to her. "Forget it." She tossed her head back. "There probably won't be any room now for my letters, with all the ones you'll be getting."

She put so much venom behind "you'll" that I took a step back. Who'd she been talking to, and what did she know that I didn't?

One hand pulled the ankle on the bed closer to her. "Not that it matters. As if it mattered to *me* how many phony letters everybody gets. That brat's the only one who gets real letters, and the company has a spy to make sure Mrs. Marr doesn't write those herself, checking every letter that reaches the train."

She really did have inside information, or else she was as stuck on the idea of spies as Jim was. "Who . . ."

The ankle was jerked even closer. I could see the deep imprints of her fingers in it. "I know what it is. I wouldn't go with T. K. on that trip to Miami. So they told Laszlo to be sure everybody else got the attention on this trip. First it was the brat; now it's you two guys. That's what it is. I'd've got that room, but Laszlo had orders."

I blinked. "Orders to move us into the vacant space if somebody was murdered?"

If looks could kill, it would have been all holiday with me. Since I didn't drop, she snarled. "They'll be giving my parts to just anybody next, anybody who's handy, just to keep me out. I'm going to be eased away from the spotlight. That's why they put me in *Five Star* with that B-movie director. This is just the next stage. Laszlo and Lorenzo are in on it together: they'd get rid of Mrs. Marr and then push you two into the spotlight so there won't be room for me."

She tossed her head again. "At least it took two of you to replace me. I'll have to remem-

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ber that when I'm playing the heroine's grandmother."

I doubted that her recent decline was caused by any studio plots, but I also doubted that saying so was going to get me anywhere. Sympathy was more the line to take.

"Why, I had no idea!" I rolled my hands together to signify mental anguish. "I surely wouldn't want to be a part of that."

She sneered.

"Honest," I said. "Laszlo doesn't have the brains for anything like that. It's sure to come out, and then it'll look as if I was in on it from the start. But if you could prove everything you know, and go to the police with it . . . "

"The studio would toss me out on my can, and I'd never even play the heroine's grandmother," she told me.

"No, no," I said. "If you can get good, solid proof—the way you did in *A Fine Funeral,* they'll cut off Laszlo completely. They've been wanting to get rid of him forever. Think how grateful they'll be!"

It would have taken a better actress than I am to make her buy this, but it did switch her train of thought to another track. "Maybe I could. And if I can prove T. K. and J. W. and the others were in on it, maybe the whole studio goes bust and I'll get out of my contract. After all that publicity, all the big studios will want me."

I had my doubts, but I didn't let those show. "I just know you can do it! And if you need any help, remember I'm right behind you to give you a boost."

My dialogue needed work. Her head snapped around. "You mean like in *Wagons to the Ivy League?"* She snatched up something and hurled it.

I ducked in time, but the crash surprised me. I had expected a pillow or, at worst, her breakfast. But I stepped backward over broken glass, and the neck of a bottle. There was nothing on it to show it was one of Lorenzo's, but I couldn't help wondering whether that had been in Velvet's bunk or Jewell had brought it along to kill the taste of breakfast.

I kept moving backward before she could find something else to toss. But would either of them have done any favors for The Child Star, collecting Lorenzo's bottles and refilling them? It was possible. Velvet anyhow, and probably Jewell, had done more difficult and time-consuming favors for directors in return for a career move. Even for assistant directors.

The platform bounced more than usual when I stepped back onto it. So did I.

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I had just a second to see the stack of mail I'd stepped on. Letters slid left and right, off the train, and I was about to follow them. I grabbed at the door, but it shut before I could get a grip. The mailbag that had been emptied was hanging just inside the little windbreak that kept most of the snow off the platform. I took hold of that. It started to tear as my feet swung off the platform.

Screaming for help was actually my second idea. My first was that things like this wouldn't happen if Mammoth Titan had gotten us a real train instead of issuing us one from the props of the Westerns Unit. MGM could afford trains built in the twentieth century. Why couldn't we?

Since my screams wouldn't have been heard over the rattling of the train (I'm known in the trade as a good screamer, but not *that* good), it was a break for me that Jim was hunting for me. He came out the door, recognized that I was about to become a casualty, and got hold of my shoulders. These were not padded, so he left imprints, but I didn't scold him for that.

He scolded me, dragging me into the external corridor of The Child Star's car. "Haven't I warned you guys about trying to get across that in your heels? I told T. K. this would happen if he didn't get a decent train."

"I'm not wearing heels for things like walking until the war's over," I told him, slapping a hand on the window. "That was somebody else's fault."

"Someone tried to make you fall?" he demanded. He pressed his face against the window, pushing me aside. When he came back, his eyes were shining.

"You know what this means?" he demanded. "If we can't get them for murder, maybe we can have them picked up for mistreating the U.S. mail."

"Was this trip really necessary?" I muttered. "Look, bright eyes, that stuff isn't U.S. mail. It was never mailed. It's as much a prop as the money."

"Oh," he said. "Well . . . I don't suppose you know who did it?"

"Only who didn't," I said. "It was put there after I went through to talk to Jewell, and she never came out here the whole time."

"Oh," he said in the same tone, as if I'd just told him his horse ran fifth. "Well, it doesn't really matter because it could have been one of the others."

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"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I don't really want to know. But I'm going to ask, just because we're old buddies and I can see you want to tell me. What do you mean, 'one of the others'?"

He looked up and down the corridor again. "It's a Nazi plot against the studio, especially this trip. The Child Star will be the next target; they wanted to get her sent back by killing Mrs. Marr, but when that failed, they had to start on her. Without her, we'll have to cancel the trip, and we won't sell nearly as many bonds." He patted his pocket. "But I've got a slingshot, so she can defend herself."

"Very good," I nodded, and patted him on the cheek. "But who is it you've outwitted so cleverly?"

"I was wrong," he said again. "It really is everyone here with a foreign name; I figured it out when Laszlo wouldn't answer my questions. It's Laszlo, Lorenzo, Jewell, and Olivia."

I blinked. "You, um, do know they hate each other, don't you? Except maybe Olivia and Lorenzo. And you know those mostly aren't their real names."

Now he nodded and patted my cheek. "Don't worry. They started on this scheme years ago, before they'd met or taken new names. Germany sent them one at a time, to work their way into the movies and wait."

"The Child Star wasn't even born that long ago."

"Tsk," he said, frustrated at my unwillingness to learn from the master spy. "They knew there'd be a war, and morale to undermine. Where could they do that better than in the movies? They had orders to be ready for anything. That's just the way it worked in *Stuttering Smith in San Francisco;* the Nazis undermined millions through the movies."

Before I could suggest that Mammoth Titan was not a studio that could undermine even thousands of morales, the engine started to stutter. I had to grab hold of the wall. The door at the far end of the corridor opened and Laszlo stumbled through. Spying us, he clapped his hands. "All right, people! We're coming up on French Willow in thirty minutes! We're just pulling onto the siding to tack up the extra bunting! Thirty minutes!"

This was sounding "Charge!" I plunged at the door of The Child Star's boudoir just as Velvet charged through it. I repeated the news for those inside who weren't so swift. Bevis patted The Child Star on the head and sauntered to the door.

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"See ya!" he called and moved out.

"Another of your big fans," I told The Child Star as I tried to pry Sissy from her notes.

The Child Star set her cards back into their case. "He's trying to make me," she replied, voice flat.

Sissy was concentrating and difficult to distract. "What?" I said, pulling on a shoulder.

The Child Star rose and brushed the wrinkles from her dress. "He's trying to make me."

"Why?" I demanded. "Sissy, come on! And how would you know?"

She shrugged. "He asked Mrs. Marr about maybe bringing me over for a weekend when we finished the trip. I heard them talking about it. He said he wanted me to have the big room right next to his in the big house. There was a door between, he said, so he could check if I needed anything in the night."

She said all this without even blinking. I swallowed. "What did your . . . Mrs. Marr say."

"She said, 'We'll see.' "

This was something to think about as we hustled along to the women's half of the dressing car. It could have been a lie, of course: something to implicate Bevis in the murder instead of whoever had helped out The Child Star. If Mrs. Marr had said, "Absolutely not! Get out!," it would have been grounds for murder, with Bevis trying to keep his proposition a secret. But Mrs. Marr's saying "We'll see" didn't fit the scenario. It was too close to something Mrs. Marr might actually have said; it was perfectly in character. And it was just one more good reason for The Child Star to bump off her ersatz parent.

It all provided so much food for thought that I didn't watch where I was walking and bumped full into our loyal conductor. "Buncha thugs," muttered George, moving on. "All alike: no consideration."

"Well, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't kill you, you know."

I didn't hear his answer, if he'd even been listening, because there were far more important things to think about than a conductor's feelings or Mrs. Marr's murder. There were hats, coats, hair, and faces as we submitted to the ministrations of Carmen, Misty, Annie, and Kay.

"You think when I push my lower lip out I look more like Lana Turner?"

"No, dear; Charles Laughton."

"Can't you at least air these coats out between stops?"

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"Whatchoo want from me? Is a war on, and is winter besides."

"What can you do to make me look younger?"

"Take off my glasses."

We started up again just as Jewell was painting her mouth. "They do that on purpose!" she shrieked, spitting out a mouthful of beauty. "And I'm trying to conserve the stuff!"

"Okay, people!"

Laszlo stepped into the car. Those of us who weren't quite covered yet didn't holler; Laszlo is management. He was concerned with quality control and felt he had to check to be sure we had our stockings painted all the way up, and on both legs, to say nothing of whether the seams were straight. The girls did this, too, but he pointed out that since he'd had experience in the publicity department, he was the expert. He lingered over Sissy's stockings, which were distinctive. The whole business of painting in the seams entertained her so much that she always had Misty paint bunnies on as well. This was a complete waste of effort. They'd look at Sissy's legs bunnies or no bunnies.

Once inspection was over, Laszlo straightened up, wiped his mouth off, and clapped his hands some more. "Okay, people! You know the drill, don't you?"

We did, but the last person who'd said so had been sent home. "You two," he explained, pointing at Olivia and Velvet. "Go out first, during the intro. Take Lorenzo with you."

The rest of our cast had been loitering at the open door keeping an eye on Laszlo's inspection, just to see if he needed assistance with the brainwork. The old character objected, "I thought we agreed young Bevis would go out with the first assault."

Bevis's head came up. He obviously hadn't been included in "we."

Laszlo whirled. "What're you doing in here? This is the women's car. We're going with the contrast: the elderly with the youngish. Then you . . . "

He pointed at Jewell, who shook her head. "I think I . . . "

"Don't think," he snapped. "It's my job to do the thinking for this troupe. Your job is to stand against the doorway with your eyelids down and your tits up. Come *on,* people! We'll never get the job done if you aren't going to take direction! And if you can't take direction, you're in the wrong business. This is for Uncle *Sam,* people. Bevis comes in next, just ahead of Baby Eloise." He gave The

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Child Star a warm smile before adding, "With you guys."

Jewell glared at Sissy and me but had no time to snarl or froth at the mouth. Laszlo went on through the whole program, grabbing our shoulders and pushing us here and there in imitation of the program on the platform. He told us where to stand, how to stand, when to smile, and when to sing what, repeating all instructions several times, with little variations as these occurred to him.

His uncle actually let Laszlo direct a film once. He turned out to be bossy and incompetent, but in spite of that, *Tiger Lady of Toongan* lost money; and the experiment had not been repeated. He released his frustrations and unused talent for confusion by bossing the help. It didn't really matter much what we did on the platform anyhow, so long as bonds got sold and the local Chamber of Commerce got its picture taken with us. Anything that went right Laszlo would take credit for, and any uncomfortable developments would give him something new to shout at us about.

He drilled the big names most, especially The Child Star and, because we'd be going out with her, Sissy and me. Jewell's scowl deepened.

But when the train slowed, she wore a bright, cheerful smile. We all wore bright, cheerful smiles. You'd have thought we were escapees from the local smiling academy.

"Kindly get that elbow out of my midsection; I may wish to use it at dinner," growled Edwin Lorenzo through his bright, cheerful smile as we crushed into the caboose, kicking furniture aside.

"Prices are supposed to be lower out here," Olivia murmured to me past her bright, cheerful smile. "Think we'll get time off to buy supplies?"

"Laszlo's keeping a tight rein," I told her through a bright, cheerful smile of my own. "He's not going to allow us a break for recreational hoarding."

As the train slowed still more, we could make out the sound of the French Willow band. We could also hear the weather that was waiting outside.

Jim sidled up to The Child Star in what he no doubt thought was a very private move. "Here," he whispered, giving her a wink and something else as well.

"Oh," she said, studying the weapon.

"It's a slingshot," he explained, holding up his hands to shield her from the view of

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any Nazi spies who happened to be standing in a direct line with his hands and the slingshot.

"Yes," she agreed, voice and face equally lackluster. "I had one in *Baby Eloise on Aloha Island*. What do you want me to do with it?"

He was baffled for a second but remembered she was not in on his intelligence reports. "Just keep it till I get a picture. And these." He handed her some small rocks.

Her forehead wrinkled a little, but she nodded. They'd taught her never to express an opinion or a preference. Slingshot and ammo were tucked away without comment.

But her eyes narrowed as we came to a halt and she saw the banners and crowds waiting out there. Red, white, and blue letters shouted, "Welcome, Baby Eloise!"

She sighed. "All those people think they love me. And they don't know me at all."

I hadn't been meant to hear that. I gave her a squeeze on one shoulder. She winced and moved to her position in line. When I realized she thought I'd squeezed a bruise on purpose, to make her get ready, I had to take three deep breaths. And Laszlo thought this was for his benefit and patted me on the thigh.

The door opened, and we had a job to do. A blast of wind hit us, half ice and half cheers. We put our heads down and shoved out into it, like clockwork figures.

We started with songs from the last war—"Over There," "Kit Bag," "Tipperary"—working up, of course, to "We Did It Before and We Can Do It Again." The crowd could sing along with those, drowning out the fact that very few of us had made it in musicals. They didn't really care. Life was different out there; we were interrupted by cheers instead of by "Cut! Wrong again!"

They all looked just the same in every depot: the clubwomen, the kids with their autograph books, the old men in old uniforms. Gangling youths gangled on all sides, hoping to get close enough to say something to those of us who had been on magazine covers.

Most of them, though, were there for The Child Star. And she was suddenly there for them. Dimples had blossomed out of a desert. Her smile exposed glistening teeth to the sleet and screaming wind. And when her little fists prompted the crowd through "The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming," the wind was drowned out. She bounced, she danced, she spun. She spoke to them all

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at once, seeming to address each one personally, her hands behind her back and her knees bent over just ever so, lest someone notice that Baby Eloise was taller than she had been in 1938.

I had seen her do all this before. But there was more to it now. When General Lorenzo's beleaguered battalion was rescued in that silly skit by Special Courier Bevis's secret weapon (Baby Eloise leaping out of his knapsack to announce that the folks back home were buying lots of bonds, so everything would soon be peachy), my eyes picked up things they hadn't before. There was the way Bevis held the knapsack. There was the way The Child Star adjusted her pose now and then when Bevis accidentally touched a bruise.

None of that was part of the show; these weren't the kind of things the audience wanted in French Willow. We were allowed to let our eyes water when the wind hit them, especially during the mayor's speech about our boys over there and our noble effort to drum up support. And when he helped dump out the fan mail that showed how much the people of French Willow and its environs appreciated our work, some of our squeals were real. He'd let some fall under the train; that was how many we'd have to replace before the next stop. Between the coal and the envelopes, I wondered whether the government was really coming out ahead on this trip. Even the stamps had to add up to something, if only three cents each.

I thought about that. Then I slipped out the sugar bowl warning I'd transferred to the pocket of this coat when I changed, just in case it was an important clue. I cupped my hands to keep it out of sight and out of the wind, and looked it over.

The stamp had been canceled. It was a real one.

Where it could have come from, I had no idea, not having received any real fan letters on that trip. The Child Star probably hadn't kept any, but Mrs. Marr might have, just to show off when Baby Eloise's contract came up for renegotiation. If Jewell was right about the studio's having some spy on board to check the real mail, this warning could have come from the spy, letting me know I shouldn't mess with the studio's plans. Or the murderer, busy helping The Child Star with those bottles, might have picked it up anywhere once it had been delivered to the train. Where was real mail delivered

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on this chain of cardboard boxes?

I looked around at our happy chorus. Somebody there had to be a doer of don'ts; there absolutely had to be someone besides The Child Star involved in the death of Mrs. Marr. Because Baby Eloise could not have lugged that bag of mail to the platform between cars without falling overboard herself.

Laszlo came through, distributing pens as we dragged out the last few songs to allow the crowd to get into lines. The next bit of the show had to be improvised. We would talk about anything, autograph anything, as long as the fan bought a bond, or even a stamp. Sissy and I were motioned in closer to The Child Star. We braced for the onslaught.

They always moved in in force, to congratulate us for the fine patriotic effort we'd been ordered to make. Every single one of us—even Laszlo—got autograph books shoved at him. Most of our names were no great treasure, but that didn't matter much. They didn't want a souvenir of us but of the occasion.

We all seemed to get a certain part of the crowd. Jewell got the men who were just barely too old for the draft and wanted her to help prove they're still young. Edwin Lorenzo attracted the matrons, while Bevis was always surrounded by kids. He picked up several for the cameras: all girls, I noticed, while the boys stood around on the platform, in awe of his muscles.

Velvet attracted the men too young or too fragile for the draft, and seemed to enjoy it. Olivia got the women: all of them looking for beauty hints or tips on how to break into the movies. I would have swapped; I got the parents with sons overseas. It must have been something in my face; more than one wished that their "he" had someone like me to come home to. Some of them pressed his last known mailing address into my hand. I probably could have made something out of that, but Laszlo was never around to notice how taken they were with me.

Sissy's appeal, like The Child Star's, seemed to be universal. "Ooh!" I heard her cry, "That reminds me of a joke. Knock knock, anybody!"

A bunch of anybodies cried, "Who's there?"

She crowed at the response, clapping her hands, and said, "Fan!"

"Fan who?" roared the chorus.

"Fan mail!" she screamed, and they all laughed with her

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because, after all, she was from Hollywood.

Meanwhile, a small boy in his Sunday best was edging up toward Baby Eloise. He was a little red and seemed to have been built of wartime materials because he kept wobbling in three or four directions at once. When The Child Star's eyes came round to him, he was ready to take off.

But when she smiled at him, his backbone seemed to jell. He leaned forward and blurted, "If I saw a Nazi spy, you know what I'd do?"

Her eyes sparkled, and she put her head down to receive confidences. "Something pretty terrible, I bet. What?"

"This!"

The kid had seen plenty of Westerns. He had drawn and fired before I could get across to him. Eloise leapt back, holding one arm.

There was, of course, a major to-do. Somebody grabbed the kid and started whacking him about the head and shoulders. Their suits matched, so I assumed it was his father.

Sissy and I, among others, went to The Child Star's aid, but she wasn't having any. "Oh, sir!" she called. "Stop! Stop! It's wonderful!"

A bright red spot showed on the arm she'd been gripping. She'd taken off her coat, surrounded by the crowd panting for a sight of her, so the kid's contraption had snapped her on bare skin.

But she wasn't gripping that arm now. She was stooping to pick up the fiendish anti-Nazi machine the kid had made out of a coat hanger or something. Her eyes were wide, and she repeated, "Wonderful!"

"It certainly is!" I agreed. She knew and I knew that having the father beat up the kid would spoil the mood completely. You don't sell bonds this way, and you don't sell your movies to the people of French Willow this way.

"He was just showing me," The Child Star told the crowd, "and it went off. But it's just the thing for a Nazi spy." Her mouth crowded into a little scowl of concentration for just a second, and then cleared as brilliantly as the sky after a summer squall. "I think I should take this on to Washington and show the president." She addressed the boy. "You could make another one for yourself, couldn't you?"

The kid had, up to this point, been trying to decide whether to cry or just die, but he stood at attention for this. "I could make lots, Baby Eloise!" he declared.

"That's wonderful!" she told him, and saluted, soldier to sol-

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dier. Then she handed the lethal-looking thing to me, saying, "We'd better keep that in the safe until we get to Washington. Maybe we can use it in a picture, too, unless Mr. Roosevelt says it has to be a secret weapon."

Our little train was going no farther east than Omaha, but the people of French Willow didn't know that. I tucked the weapon into my coat and ripped open the warning envelope I was carrying, to write down the names and address of boy and father, whose heads were visibly larger than they had been a minute before. I even had them autograph the envelope for me, "Unless," as I told them, "the president wants this on display at the White House."

We sold lots of bonds in French Willow. Nimitz should send me a thank you note.

Laszlo wasn't around to see most of this, but he heard about it. "I'll talk to you later," he growled at me when he came smiling up through the throng. "If you can't take better care of her than that . . . "

But his main business was with The Child Star. "It's getting to be time to leave, folks! Have to keep to our schedule! You know how it is! How would you like to drive the train for a bit, Baby Eloise?"

She was fatigued enough to betray an actual opinion. "If I stood on the caboose and waved to the people, I'd see more of them."

Everyone cheered except Laszlo. He got a hand clamped around her unmarked arm, snatched up her coat, and said, "Oh, but we'll get much nicer pictures with you driving. You'll get to wear a nice hat. Wouldn't Baby Eloise look great in an engineer's hat, folks?"

Everyone cheered some more, and the crowd moved up the platform a ways. I was moving with it until the Nazi-smasher slipped from my coat. The thing refused to be picked up while I had my gloves on. By the time I had the gloves off, and the Allies' new secret weapon stowed where it would be harder to lose, the parade had moved on considerably.

Before I could join it, a voice demanded, "What did she say? Is she going to wave from the caboose?"

I glanced back and started forward. "Um, no, George. She's going to drive the engine."

He reached up and took hold of my sleeve. "I know I heard her say something about the caboose."

I threw both arms into the air. "And she knows what she's

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doing, too. They'd do better with the caboose, and there'd be room for all of us. They're probably going to have her drive for a few feet, and then they'll have to back up so we can all board the train. We may all wind up on the caboose after all. But you know what Laszlo's like."

"Got pictures of Washington and Lincoln in the caboose," he noted. "FDR, too. Mayor and like that could get their picture taken with her under those, once I got some bunting tacked up."

The wind was hitting me full, now that the crowd wasn't there to protect me. "That's a good idea, George. If the weather's going to be like this the whole trip, that'll be the only way to get decent pictures. But let me tell Laszlo. He won't like the idea if it comes from you."

"You're all alike," George snarled. "Come on and see what's there."

I had been in the caboose before, of course, but not without the mass of fellow performers, technicians, and publicity pushers. It was a mess, of course, after we'd kicked through it, but I could see George's plan at once.

"Right next to a good old American potbellied stove, too," I said as he repaired some of the bunting we'd knocked down on the way out and straightened the display of presidents. "You'd have to move that box of kindling so nobody trips, though, and . . . "

Next to the box of wood sat a stack of envelopes, the top one addressed to Baby Eloise. "What are those?"

He glanced back. "Ah, we use those to start the fire. You won't miss 'em. Since we have to douse the fire every time you lot comes through, so nobody burns their valuable bodies, you might as well help us get it started again. Toss some in now, if you know anything about how to do that."

"We know how to start fires in California, George," I told him. "Nobody better." I reached down for a handful. What I really wanted to know was whether these were prop letters or real ones, which could make George the studio spy.

They were real, but it didn't matter so very much. I touched the top letter and little springs shot away. A rope skittered up through the pile and caught around my wrist. I jerked back, putting a foot up on a foot of the stove for leverage. But while that foot was off the floor, a second loop came across the floor. George flipped the rope and pulled it tight on my ankle.

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"Ha!" he said, and the ankle went up in the air.

I couldn't see him, not with my coat and skirt over my head. But I knew his teeth were clenched as he said, "I saw that mark on her arm, you witch. You're all alike."

"George, what is this?" I hollered. I've been in some serials, and suddenly having that potbellied stove so close didn't seem so friendly.

He hauled on the rope and I tipped up enough so the piccolo in my pocket whacked me in the ear. "That rope, unh, on your wrist goes down to the ties. When we get up steam, we'll see what's stronger; you or these knots."

His boots were just barely in view. I wondered if The Child Star could get this thing started before he had that rope secured, or if they were just trying the hat on her.

"You planned this together?" I panted. "You and Eloise, so she'd be the one who got to . . . umf!"

I sloped down toward the floor because he had to come forward to kick me. "Don't you say a word against her!" he ordered. "Fair enough, though, to let her do it. You're the guys who beat her up so she makes your money."

The boots moved back and I tipped up some more. George went on talking. I didn't interrupt him.

"I heard her scream last night," he told me. "I thought I wouldn't hear that any more once the old bat was dead. But you're worse. You hurt her right in the middle of the crowd. You're movie people; you don't care what other people think. You don't remember there are real people."

He hauled on the rope some more. "But there are lots of us who love Baby Eloise. We're real. I've read the letters as they come in. I know."

"You've been reading the mail that . . . "

"I used to get letters," he growled. "Rita knew every station on her old man's route. I'd get a letter every other one, some runs. But she wanted to be in the movies. I told her mother not to take her. I didn't get so many letters. She'd work ten, twelve hours a day, not but eight years old, and they'd give her things to keep her alert. Then I didn't get any more letters. They had her so alert she tried to fly out a tenth floor window. Her mother tried to stop her and went over with her."

He punctuated this with yanks and jerks on the rope, as

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if he wanted to pull me apart before the train got a chance. Something poked me in the neck, and I wondered if he was working a third rope. Then I figured out the proposition.

The inventor of that Axis-assassinator could probably have cocked it faster, but he probably would have had the use of both hands. I reached out with my unlassoed foot to try to get braced against the stove. "Ha!" said George, and pulled me nearly vertical. That was a good sign; it meant I wasn't fastened in place yet.

With one hand, and with my eyes blurring a little from dangling upside-down so long, a thing I had not done since *Two-Gun Fox and the Ring of Black Stone*, I got my secret weapon together. Then I pulled my free arm back and let it swing around in George's direction, twisting as much as I could.

The Hitler-hurter went off and caught him somewhere in the pants. It couldn't have hurt as much as when Eloise got it on the bare arm, but it was enough for him to let go of the rope and jump back.

I let go of it as I hit the floor; no time to reload. Besides, I wanted George a little more off balance. I used the free hand to grab an ankle and pull him down while he was still wondering what hit him. Then I scrambled around to give him a good kick with those costume-department heels.

The next bit wasn't very well staged: just a lot of heel and toe work to keep his hands off the ropes while I dug at the loop around my wrist. I couldn't quite stand up to do this, but I didn't dare lie down, either: that would give him too broad a target for stomping. He'd have done it, too. His face was still perfect casting, but now, instead of the kindly old conductor, he was the heavy who threw bums off boxcars all through the thirties. I was wondering why he didn't go for that club they always seemed to have in the pictures. I figured it out when he pulled the gun.

But by now, despite a lot of kicking and crawling around, I had my hand loose. I needed it, too, as I scurried out of that caboose like the undercranked heroine of a Three Stooges short. I hit the ground outside and kicked off my shoes, for easier running and so I wouldn't break a heel: heels were hard to come by. Then I took off up the side of the train away from the audience. I'd like to say this was to trick George, or to keep him from shooting Sissy or another innocent bystander. But it was just instinct, part of being in the business this long. You don't

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take your problems to the public, not until those problems have been passed by the publicity department. Places like French Willow don't want you bothering them with problems that haven't been touched up into neat stories. And they won't go to your pictures if you're going to be a nuisance.

So where was I bound for, up the wrong side of the train? I don't know. But better dead than not working.

I didn't get far anyway, in stocking feet on frozen gravel. I hit the ground and heard bells. When my head cleared, George stood over me, one hand aiming the gun, one hand on his train, which had been so sullied by us Hollywood types.

But a Hollywood type was in the cab, and the bells I'd heard had been real ones, to warn the train's cast and crew that Baby Eloise was going to try to get things moving. George fell down, and the gun went off. The train paused to consider this and moved a little more. I crawled over to George, keeping one eye on the machinery.

Better to have kept that eye on George. The gun came up at my face. Blood was slipping down the ice, but George had some acting blood in him. He'd played dead.

"You're not going to hit any more kids," he promised me, just before the gun went off again.

But in the middle of the sentence, the train jerked him aside, spoiling his shot. I grabbed his gun arm and, holding it down, pulled on him. This was stupid because the other arm was under a train. Anyway, he didn't want any help from me and jerked back, throwing his head up to where nobody's head was supposed to go.

The resulting mess took a lot of tidying up, what with the gun, me in my stocking feet and splattered with bits of George, and that odd arrangement of ropes in the caboose. Between Jim's advice and the brakeman's testimony about George's working on something secret all through the trip, they finally decided to explain it by labeling poor George an Axis operative. This pleased the fans more than telling them George had just been a fan gone wrong.

None of this was decided in an afternoon, of course. Laszlo sent off a string of cables from French Willow to report the problems. We had to make our afternoon date in Woodridge, where we found cables waiting for us. These were not in answer to Laszlo's laments, though. We found out what they were when the show was over and men started taking

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the train apart. Mammoth Titan had made a deal with Schukraft-Mauro, a slightly larger competitor, to combine resources and maybe extend the bond drive as far as Rockford, Illinois, maybe even Chicago. Half the Mammoth Titan people would be going east on this patriotic caravan; the rest would hook up to some freight cars headed back to California.

I was grateful for the freight cars. Without them, I'd've had to walk home. The half headed east was the marketable half: Bevis, Lorenzo, Jewell, and, of course, Baby Eloise. We ornaments were expendable. Schukraft-Mauro, having specialized in B musicals, had more of them, with better wardrobes.

"Don't worry," Jim told me. "You took out a Nazi spy! You'll see; they'll use this to lever you into the female lead in *Night of Dr. Jekyll.*"

"Ya eedmo Ob-Ararat," I said. Jim had perfect faith in my agent. So had I. In Cal's hands, the whole business would probably lever me into a role as fifth girl on the right, second row back, in Andy Hardy's English class.

Jewell was so giddy at finding herself on the credit side of the ledger that she tried a little joke on Sissy. "Knock knock."

Sissy blinked, thought about it, and remembered to say, "Who's there?"

"Toodle," said Jewell.

Sissy blinked again. "Toodle who?"

Jewell kissed her on one cheek. "Toodle-oo to you, too, darling. See you around."

Sissy kissed her back but frowned. "Yes, goodbye. But weren't you going to do a joke?"

I saw Lorenzo hug Olivia goodbye. He should have. He'd talked her into joining the poker game and now owed her four hundred thousand dollars, which, even in stage money, amounted to something. (Velvet had joined the game, too, trying desperately to lose to Bevis, but it hadn't worked out.)

In the midst of all these touching fadeouts, we heard applause: Laszlo, as it turned out. "Come on, people," he yelled, banging his hands together some more. "Let's move it out. You and you and you: you packed? Okay, you know where your car is. Let's go. Let's go." He had to do this before his counterparts from Schukraft-Mauro showed up and opened up a competing shop.

I started to haul my suitcase back to the car I'd started this trip on. I passed Baby Eloise on the way: she was sitting on a bench, leafing through a sheaf of paper. A couple of cables sat on her lap; they'd been waiting

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for her, along with the paper. I'd heard a little of what was in them. A new relative, a Miss Marr this time, was coming to take up the vacancy as Baby Eloise's mother.

"Know her?" I'd asked, after Laszlo broke the news.

"A little," Baby Eloise had told me, face perfectly still. "She uses her hand."

I paused in front of her now until she looked up from the pages she was skimming. When I raised an eyebrow to inquire, she said, "Script. They want me to be ready to start a new project when I get back. *Baby Eloise and O'Toole over Tokyo.*"

"That'll go over big," I told her. "Who's O'Toole?"

"Mr. Flint."

I glanced back to where Bevis was posing for a couple of photographers, a girl wrapped around each arm. "Bevis?" I said. "What will you do?"

She gave me that same look I got when I failed to whack her with the bath brush. "What they tell me to do," she said.

I reached out and patted one little hand. She didn't know what to make of that.

"I'll write you," I promised.

I did, too. Not fan mail, you understand, because she couldn't ever be The Child Star to me now. She was one of us.

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The Cardinal's Cross

by Mary Amlaw

It was the smooth way the long black car closed in on the little priest that scared Zebulon. Two muscular men in dark business suits stepped from the vehicle and neatly put the priest between them. Undaunted by the retreatants spilling onto the narrow sidewalk through the gates of the convent of the Daughters of Elias, the two men swept their startled prey into the rear of the car and drove off toward Washington Street. Before they turned the corner, something arced from the limo's window and glittered briefly in the afternoon sun on its trip to the gutter.

A pickup in broad daylight, and the innocents who had just come from their prayers at the convent didn't even realize it.

Zebulon realized only too well. Life in a high-crime area taught its survival skills even to nine-year-olds, and Zebulon was a fast study. He clung to his perch in the maple that overlooked the convent grounds and considered his options.

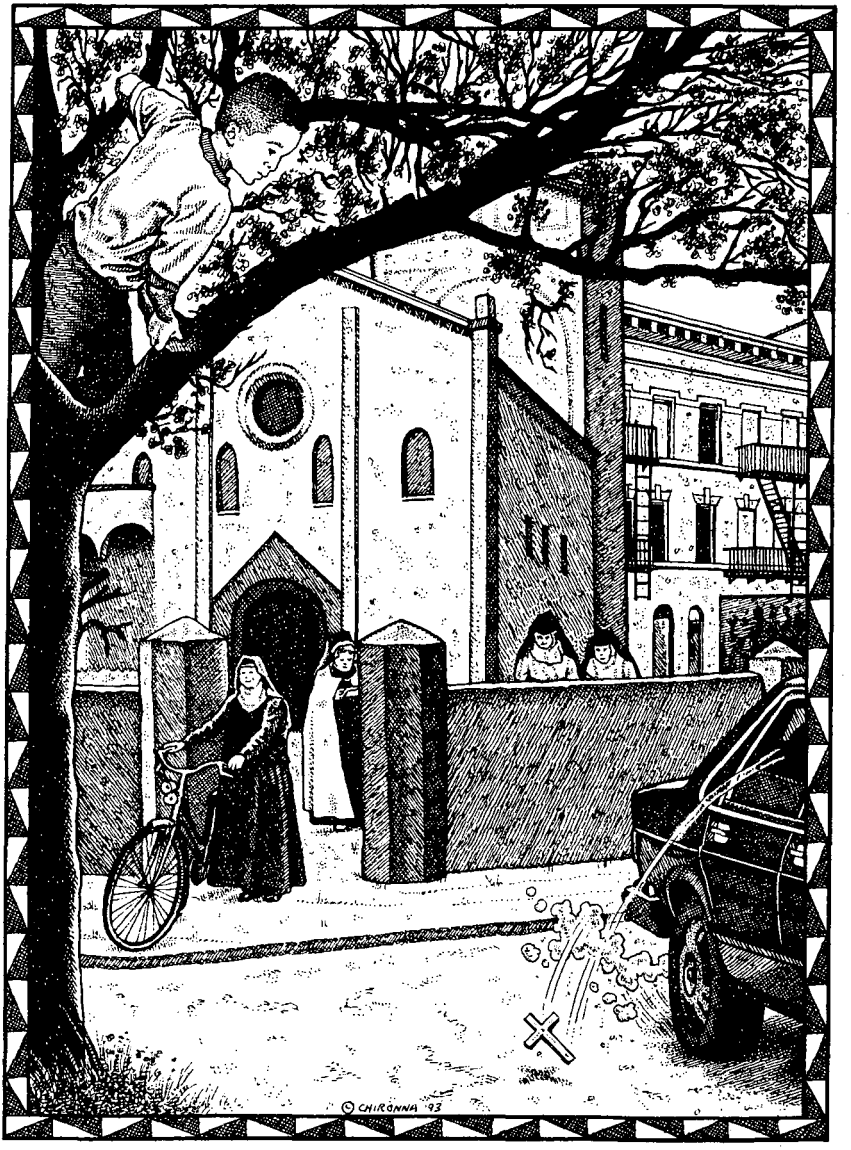
What had happened was none of his business. He didn't know the priest who'd been taken. Maybe he'd been scooped up for something innocent—to hear a deathbed confession, for instance. Maybe he was friends with the men in the car, and they were just giving him a lift home.

Even Zebulon Williams, nine years old, couldn't make that one wash. The little priest was in big trouble; the wrong people wanted to talk to him. The smartest thing Zeb could do was pretend he'd seen nothing. He should definitely keep his mouth shut. He should definitely not pick up whatever had been tossed into the gutter.

Zeb was many things, but coward wasn't one of them. He dropped from the tree by his hands, wiped his nervous face with the end of his T-shirt, and ambled casually to the corner. He tried to look innocent as he reached down and swooped up the thing that had been tossed from the car.

It was a small brass cross, polished until it shone like gold. A legend was engraved on

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ZEBULON CLUNG TO HIS PERCH IN THE MAPLE THAT OVERLOOKED THE CONVENT GROUNDS AND CONSIDERED HIS OPTIONS.

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the back: *Gift of Theresa Lynch.*

The unfortunate priest had come from the Daughters of Elias, the province of Mother Mary Dominic and the unworldly community of nuns Zebulon considered his own special responsibility. Mary Dominic should be told what had happened.

Kindly Clare Francis, the convent cook, beamed when she saw Zeb at the door. "You might have to wait a while. Mother's speaking with the cardinal," Clare informed him.

Zeb considered the wisdom of reappearing on the street with his errand undone. If the men in the limo came back for the cross, Zeb didn't want to be found with it.

"I'll wait, sister."

Provided with lemonade and chocolate chip cookies in abundance, Zebulon settled down in the high-backed pink wing chair in the visitors' parlor and wished the cardinal a speedy departure.

Mother Mary Dominic, the only woman except his mother who addressed the august cardinal archbishop of Boston as "Jim," also silently wished him on his way. They were second cousins twice removed, a tenuous relationship at best, but the cardinal had grown up without siblings and considered Mary Dominic something of a younger sister in need of guidance. Although the Daughters of Elias were not under his jurisdiction, their convent was situated in the cardinal's see and he felt a certain responsibility both for them and for the lay people attracted to their doors.

Often the cardinal wished that the Daughters of Elias had followed the trend to the suburbs during the years of "white flight" and had left the declining inner city to face God without their intercession, but he could hardly say so.

A magnificent figure with his proud bearing, fleece of white hair, and crimson robes, he seemed to have settled permanently in the carved Italianate armchair in the convent's inner parlor, a room reserved solely for visiting clergy.

"Mimi, be sensible. It's neither just nor charitable to knowingly expose your retreatants to danger. Even you must admit this area is far from safe."

"The area is unsafe, but we are in no danger," Mary Dominic countered, stretching a point. There was no danger from the immediate residents, who admired the nuns, largely due to Mary Dominic's efforts to help all who asked. Tran-

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sients from other areas couldn't be spoken for.

This was an old topic between Mary Dominic and the cardinal, requiring lengthy reassurances on her part before he would grudgingly give in. Mary Dominic usually enjoyed the go-round, but Clare Francis had just slipped in to inform her that Zebulon Williams and Sister Angela were both waiting to speak to her.

It was approaching time for evening prayer. The gates to the parking lot couldn't be locked for the night until the cardinal's limo, now plainly visible from the street, drove away. For all his talk about the dangers of the neighborhood, the cardinal apparently had perfect trust in the security of the parking lot, or perhaps he had an especially vigilant guardian angel, for he'd let his driver take a quick tea break in the kitchen to sample the fine pastries produced by Sister Clare Francis.

Mary Dominic hoped no stranger succumbed to the temptation to divest the unattended car of its hubcaps, hood ornaments, or more vital parts while the cardinal sat and lectured her about safety.

"Indeed, your eminence, the people of the neighborhood are extremely protective of us. We do take the precautions dictated by prudence, of course, but we feel strongly that Our Lord has us in His hand, and this is where He wants us to be." She spoke as decisively as possible while remaining within the necessary bounds of respect.

The cardinal, a handsome Irishman with a charming smile, rubbed the crook of his crosier against his chin. He asked with deceptive mildness, "Then why is the gold cross missing from the guest chapel? I hardly think one of the retreatants has taken it. Therefore, it must have been stolen by one of your neighbors."

The plight of the neighbors was one of Mary Dominic's major concerns, and she addressed the cardinal by title, hoping to inspire him to help them.

"The people here have very little, your eminence. Everyone, including the Church, has abandoned them. If one of them in his desperation steals a trifle from us, then I say it is to our shame for not responding to their obvious need. Whoever has taken the cross is welcome to it, as far as I'm concerned."

"You miss my point, mother." The cardinal in turn became frostily formal. "I was speaking of the community's safety. And while the cross may not have great value for you, it was a gift from my late aunt, if

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you recall, and therefore has a certain sentimental value for me."

Mary Dominic, aware that the sun was going down and the grounds were still open, said shortly, "It's only brass, your eminence, not gold. We did not think it fitting that we, who are vowed to poverty, should accept a gift of gold, surrounded as we are by people who are truly poor." Her eyes wandered to the cardinal's gem-encrusted gold crosier. The excessively rich trappings of church officials irritated Mary Dominic, and the cardinal had heard her thoughts on the matter ad nauseam.

The cardinal rose, gathering his episcopal robes about him as dramatically as an actor. "Please keep me informed. We will speak of this again."

"Indeed, if your eminence pleases."

She kissed his ring, accepted his blessing, and thought how wise the Mother Foundress had been to establish the Daughters of Elias in obedience solely to their own Mother General, thus protecting them from the authoritative itch of local clergy.

Every nun in the convent would want a private word with the cardinal, who gave individual blessings to all who came forward during the course of his leisurely departure. To assure Sister Angela of some time with him, Mary Dominic spoke with her before hearing what Zebulon had to say.

"I was stripping the retreatants' beds and found this in the room assigned to Father Garcia." Angela put a small gold cross about six inches long on Mary Dominic's desk. "It was wedged between the bed and the wall. At first I thought it was the cross missing from the chapel, but it's not the same one."

It was not unheard of for a priest to carry a cross among his possessions, but Father Garcia, a small, nervous man who jumped at shadows, hadn't seemed especially devout. When asked if he'd care to concelebrate mass or hear the nuns' confessions, he had claimed his health wouldn't stand the strain. He followed his refusal with a tasteless joke about fainting in the confessional and scaring the nuns into thinking their sins had been too much for him.

Mary Dominic knew most of the priests in the archdiocese personally and all of them by reputation, but Father Garcia had been a stranger to her. He had said that he was newly ordained and assigned to Gate of Heaven parish, but Mary Dominic found no mention of him

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in the Archdiocesan Directory. She hadn't thought much of it at the time. Published once a year, the directory missed the infrequent assignments made after it had gone to press. Father Garcia would be included in the next edition.

Now, as she examined the cross Angela presented to her, the omission of Garcia's name seemed vaguely ominous.

At first glance she too would have mistaken the cross Angela placed on her desk for the one missing from the chapel, but closer examination showed its ends had been capped. She twisted one carefully.

A little hill of white powder drifted onto her desktop.

"Sugar!" Sister Angela said. "Who'd put sugar in a cross? Perhaps Father Garcia is diabetic?"

Mary Dominic suppressed a smile. "I don't believe this is sugar, sister." Carefully she unscrewed the other three caps. They too harbored a supply of powder.

"I would appreciate your not mentioning this just yet, Sister Angela." Mary Dominic pushed the cross to the back of her desk drawer and locked it. This was a matter for Sergeant Mike McGuire, not for the community. "Would you ask Zebulon to come in now, please?"

Zebulon's tale of the kidnapped priest, bolstered by his solemn presentation of the cross that had been thrown from the car, strengthened Mary Dominic's conviction that the convent had been used in a matter better suited to police investigation than community speculation.

"Thank you, Zebulon. We were wondering what had happened to this cross. If you call tomorrow afternoon, I'm sure Sister Clare Francis will have a special treat for you."

Zebulon beamed. He envisioned a fine reward of Sister Clare Francis' baked goods for months to come. Not that he had acted for a reward. He had simply done what he thought right.

After Zebulon left the parlor, Mary Dominic took the cross Angela had found from her drawer and placed it next to the one that belonged in the guest chapel. One might easily be mistaken for the other.

Had the cocaine-filled cross belonged to Father Garcia? Mary Dominic hoped not. Although sad things were imputed to priests nowadays, none had yet been accused of drug trafficking. Yet Father Garcia must have taken the lookalike cross from the chapel. How had it gotten in the car that swept him away unless he

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himself had substituted it for its more sinister twin?

Why would Garcia exchange crosses? The most charitable explanation she could invent was that he had stumbled on a drug deal, and hoped to secrete the drug-filled cross safely in the convent while he threw its owners off the scent by carrying the nuns' cross as a decoy.

She shivered. The convent might seem a safe hiding place to someone brought up to respect such things, but if the cross and its contents was the property of Father Garcia's abductors, respect for church property wouldn't hinder them from taking it back as ruthlessly as necessary.

She turned the cross in her hands. Something was out of kilter. Any diocesan priest who discovered drugs being delivered in crosses would go at once to his bishop with the evidence, and not try to hide it in a convent. It would seem that Father Garcia meant to hide the cross for himself. Frowning, Mary Dominic locked it safely away again.

The missing notice in the Archdiocesan Directory returned to mind. Father Garcia had said he was newly ordained, but in too poor health to hear confessions or to concelebrate mass. That didn't add up.

Mary Dominic called the rectory of Gate of Heaven parish. When she asked for Father Garcia, a puzzled voice replied, "I'm afraid you have the wrong number. There's no Father Garcia in this parish."

Nor in any parish, Mary Dominic guessed. She dialed Mike McGuire at the police station and left an urgent message for him to meet with her at the convent as soon as possible. When she hung up the bell for evening prayer was ringing.

Mary Dominic went to chapel with much on her mind.

After Sister Vincent had seen the last of the retreatants off the grounds of the convent, she lingered until the cardinal's driver had returned to his post, then planted herself on the path where the cardinal would emerge. She meant to let him know what a martyr on earth she was, ask his blessing, and finally investigate the outdoor Fatima shrine, which had distracted her during outdoor Benediction.

The moment the cardinal entered the parking lot, Vincent pounced, detaining him for fifteen minutes while the daylight turned to dusk. The bell for evening prayer sounded as

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the cardinal's limo pulled out. Vincent's duty was to lock the gates immediately and head straight for chapel, but she had to appease her curiosity before the light failed. The gates could wait a moment or two.

She approached the statue of Mary cautiously. There! she had been right after all! The same silvery glint she had noticed during Benediction shone on the statue's white marble face.

As she drew closer, she saw that the glint was caused by a colorless liquid that reflected the sunset's glow. Vincent squeezed her eyes shut. After several seconds she opened them slowly. The colorless liquid was still there. As she looked, it began to move down the statue's face in distinct drops.

Tears.

Vincent's heart hammered as if it would burst from her body. She had always been hardheaded, a practical creature incapable of the finer flights of fancy. Stories of various weeping statues occasionally reached the convent and caused lively discussion. The younger nuns, like Sister Angela, were only too ready to believe the tears were miraculous in spite of Mary Dominic's repeated warnings that such phenomena could be misleading, and had nothing to do with holiness.

"It could be the result of certain atmospheric conditions," Mary Dominic cautioned the more credulous sisters. "It could be imagination, or a kind of hysteria; perhaps deliberate trickery, or even diabolical manifestation."

That was enough to convince Vincent such things were better left alone, but it wasn't enough for Sister Angela.

"You did not mention, mother, that it could also be of God."

Mary Dominic assented reluctantly with a brusque nod.

"Don't you think, mother, that in the case of statues of Our Lady of Fatima, it is most likely God? When you consider Our Lady's warning that war is the result of sin—surely, mother, she weeps to incite us to the penance and prayer she asked of us, that the world might know peace."

It was one thing to talk about a weeping statue and quite another to experience it. Even as Vincent watched, the trickle of tears became a steady flow.

An effect of the sunset, Vincent told herself firmly, and boldly brushed the statue's face to prove to herself nothing was there. When she drew her hand away, several teardrops clung to her fingertips, where they

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sparkled with the vibrancy of life.

That wasn't what brought Vincent to her knees.

When she had touched the statue's face, she felt the warm texture of living flesh. The eyes seemed to look straight at her.

Confounded, Vincent stared at the weeping figure. The eyes that looked back at her seemed profoundly sad.

Vincent, who had never experienced a single mystical moment in her life, seemed at one and the same time to be kneeling on the gravel before the weeping statue and, from a distance, to be viewing the earth, shimmering jewellike in the black immensity of space. She saw the sun-bathed planet as a whole simultaneously with its individual countries and peoples. Its beauty took her breath away.

As the planet rotated, a tide of darkness enveloped it, weighing it down, gradually overcoming the light. Countries and people were swept up in blackness. The blackness brought war to Serbia, famine to Somalia and the Sudan, oppression to many nations, greed, graft, the prostitution and abuse of children. The whole unchecked power of evil raged before her.

She saw her share in that dark tide and recoiled in horror. She owed nothing to the kingdom of darkness! She had vowed herself to the light; to good, and not to evil.

A great searchlight seemed to illuminate her being. At once she became aware of many things, first among them that she should not have been here in the garden alone but at evening prayer. She had sacrificed fidelity to duty to indulge her curiosity about the statue. Duty with her often came second-best to self-will.

The evil she did was small in comparison with drug dealing, ritual Satanic murder, unjust and corrupt wars; hers was the evil of impatience, of self-importance, of failing to reach out to others in love.

She had thought herself a drop of cleansing water scouring the filth of the world. In truth she was a bit of sludgy oil creating her own tarry wake. Her evil was small because she was small, not because she was the power for good.

She wanted with all her being to oppose the forces of darkness. With astounding clarity, she saw that her only weapon was to do the little good she was capable of. At the moment, that meant answering the bell for evening prayer.

No matter that the statue was weeping. That was its business. Evening prayer was hers.

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She leaped up, no longer the woman she had been even a few minutes ago, and headed towards the chapel.

She had completely forgotten the unlocked gates behind her.

Zebulon, feeling relieved now that Mary Dominic had the scoop, skipped down the stone steps from the convent with a light heart. A cautious check of the street sent him scurrying up his favorite maple. The long black car was parked at the curb outside the convent once again, and two dark-suited men were advancing through the convent grounds on the tall skinny nun with the frowning face, the nun who always spoke to Zeb rudely. She was rising from her knees before a white statue that glowed faintly in the dusk. One of the men raised his arm. Zeb saw the glint of metal as he brought it down.

The nun never knew what hit her.

Zebulon, his whole body vibrating with terror, watched the two men drag the nun across the grounds and disappear with her into the crypt in the far corner of the garden. He didn't dare leave the safety of the tree; better to perch in it all night and risk his mother's wrath than to descend before the menacing black car had gone its way.

It was not unusual for Vincent to appear in chapel late, but she'd never before failed to arrive at all. Mary Dominic wondered fleetingly if Vincent, like others before her in this age of irresponsibility and broken commitments, had simply put on street clothes and walked off, leaving her vows and the discipline of convent life behind. To be humble, to become a grain of sand, to put the good of the community before self-interest were goals fast being wiped out by the me-first ethic, and the community that had attracted more new vocations than could be accepted, from its founding until the 1960's, at present had only two postulants.

Vincent's cavalier attitude towards the rules so necessary for order in the community was not helpful in the training of new entrants, and Mary Dominic had been praying for the wisdom to broach this to Vincent as effectively and lovingly as possible after evening prayers.

Even more worrisome than Vincent's absence from chapel was her absence from supper and recreation. Mary Dominic inquired discreetly if anyone knew Vincent's whereabouts, but no one had seen her since the retreatants had left that afternoon.

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When a quick check showed that Vincent's cell was empty, she summoned Clare Francis, a marvel of discretion, and they made a hasty but efficient search of the convent, without success.

"She might have fallen ill in one of the hermitages, mother," Clare suggested. Together they made the rounds of the small outdoor shrines set within three-walled enclosures, all quite near the main house. No Sister Vincent.

Around them stood black night, pierced by the raucous sounds of the neighborhood come to life—shouts, scuffles, curses; blasters and stereos hurling rock and rap; men shouting obscene come-ons to girls looking for tricks, who answered with obscene suggestions of their own.

Mary Dominic found Vincent's disappearance disturbing, especially in light of her conversation with the cardinal, who had roused all Mary Dominic's unspoken but seldom acknowledged fears about the safety of her charges.

It was imprudent to continue searching the far reaches of the grounds by themselves in the dark. Although Mary Dominic had great faith in the providence of God, she knew He also expected people to use the common sense He'd given them.

"It's time to ask for help," Mary Dominic decided.

"I'll pray to Saint Anthony," Clare replied. "He never fails to find lost eyeglasses and keys. Surely he'll find Vincent for us."

No need to remind Clare Francis, so practical and circumspect, to keep Vincent's disappearance quiet until Mary Dominic gave the word. While Clare went off to invoke St. Anthony, Mary Dominic dialed Mike McGuire again.

Zebulon's story of the priest's kidnapping had disturbed her more than she had been willing to admit. She had given all the information about the cocaine-filled cross and Garcia's kidnapping to the policeman who had taken her message for Mike McGuire earlier; now she feared Sister Vincent's disappearance and the kidnapping were related.

This time she reached Mike personally.

"I have some information on your Father Garcia," Mike said. "He's not a priest. Never was. Just a runner for the crime bosses who thought he could cut himself in on a little drug dealing of his own. He intended to hide the cross at the convent until it seemed safe to go back for it. Tough luck for him he was caught at it. We

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found him shot full of holes and left for dead."

That news intensified Mary Dominic's anxiety. "Our Sister Vincent is missing, Mike. She was last seen in the garden just as dusk was falling, and I'm afraid she's come to harm. The owners of a certain cross may realize it's now in my possession."

"I'm on my way," Mike promised.

Vincent awoke with a headache to find herself gagged and bound hand and foot on the floor of the crypt. Two scowling men in black, who seemed born of the noxious tide she had seen enveloping the world, were bending over her. The old Vincent would have panicked. The new one, much to her own astonishment, felt absolutely no fear and remained eerily serene.

"She's coming to," the tall one said.

The short one nodded. "Go tell the boss dame to hand us over our property and we'll hand over hers. Any grief and one tall, skinny nun will be going to heaven real soon."

The tall one left. The short one aimed the biggest gun Vincent had ever seen at her temple. She didn't know why she hadn't fainted at the sight of it. She was no more than a commodity to her captors, and she knew that as soon as she lost her value for them, they would kill her. Yet she remained calm. The spirits of the sisters whose bodies slept peacefully in the crypt seemed to be supporting her, speaking to her of heavenly rewards and the power of God.

As placidly as if she were in the safety of her own cell, Vincent fell into peaceful interior communion with her Savior.

Zebulon had never been more relieved than when Mike McGuire's car turned into the convent's parking lot. He bounced out of the tree before Mike shut off the engine, tapping his lips frantically for Mike to be quiet. Sliding into the front seat, Zeb whispered, "Two dudes from that black car out front dragged the tall, skinny sister into the crypt. One of them's still in there with her. The other one's in the convent."

"Is it the same car that picked up the priest, Zeb?"

Zebulon nodded nervously. Some things were better not spoken aloud. Mike, who had an appreciation of Zeb's powers of observation, called in a make on the license plate. When he heard it belonged to Salvatore DiPietro, he whistled and

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asked for backup. The DiPietro brothers were bad business.

"Time you were out of here, Zeb. I'll cover you."

Zebulon gratefully sprinted for home while Mike set a trap for Vincent's abductors. Then Mike presented himself at the convent's front door as if he had nothing on his mind but a friendly chat with Mary Dominic.

The nun who led him to Dominic's office greeted him so cheerfully that Mike realized the community had no knowledge of what was happening. Mary Dominic, however, was a different story. She looked up from her desk brightly, but there were tension lines around her eyes and her smile was strained.

Mike recognized her visitor: Salvatore DiPietro, wanted for everything from breaking and entering to murder. DiPietro looked Mike over but didn't recognize him as a threat.

"Why, Mike, how delightful to see you! Let me return this gentleman's property to him and I'll be right with you." Mary Dominic sounded as if she'd had no idea Mike was going to drop in. The muscular, dark-browed DiPietro looming over her desk scowled as she took out the cross with the capped arms. As soon as DiPietro grabbed it, Mike read him his rights and arrested him.

Vincent told Mary Dominic every detail of her abduction as she was required to do in obedience. Mary Dominic listened in some amazement.

"Dear Sister Vincent, Our Lord must be most pleased with the confidence you showed in Him, remaining so serene in the face of danger."

"He cannot be pleased with my disobedience, mother. Had I obeyed the bell, I would have been safely in the chapel. I deserve penance, not praise."

Mary Dominic considered for a moment. "In that case, your penance is to refrain from mentioning the weeping statue to the community. I would like to wait and pray before speaking of it to anyone."

When Vincent replied, "Of course, mother," humbly as a child and quite unlike her usual argumentative self, Mary Dominic was half inclined to believe a miracle had indeed taken place.

Over the days and weeks that followed, Vincent continued to be responsible, soft-spoken, and obedient. Mary Dominic marveled at the change, even as she wondered how long it would last.

Some months later, a retreatant asked to see Sister

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Vincent for spiritual direction. A buzz went through the community. Vincent, being *asked* for? It was unheard of.

When Vincent arrived at the parlor to meet her retreatant, she found the shorter of the two thugs who had held her captive. This time instead of a gun he held a black hat in fingers that nervously worked their way around the brim.

"Rocco DiPietro," he said, holding out one stubby hand. "Maybe you don't want to shake, considering."

"You asked to see me?"

He nodded and mangled his hat some more. "Was you scared in the crypt when you was tied up with a gun at your head?"

"Not in the least." About to blurt she was more surprised than anyone at her unshakable calm, Vincent bit back the words. Least said, soonest mended.

"Yeah. You didn't act scared. Got God in your corner, huh?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

He looked at the floor. Vincent maintained a tranquil silence. When he finally glanced at her, she was struck by the beauty of his eyes, soft and brown, totally out of keeping with the rest of his battered features.

"My brother Sal's been killed. My kid won't talk to me. I have HIV."

Vincent, realizing he wanted something from her but not knowing what it could be, said softly, "I will pray for you."

"That ain't enough." He looked at her steadily. She found his attention unnerving, but didn't know what more she could do for him.

"Everything's changed," he said. "I mean, like, I never been afraid to die. But knowing you're gonna die some far-off day ain't the same as knowing you're dying right now. And Sal—Sal was my kid brother. He wasn't supposed to die before me. It ain't right. Nothin's right. You get what I mean?"

Suddenly Vincent did. A beatific smile lighted her long, plain face. He wanted her to help him make sense of his world. She could do that, for the world made perfect sense to her.

She gestured towards a straight-backed chair. "Please be seated, Mr. DiPietro."

She sat close by, feeling as tender towards him as if he were her own infant son. Gently, softly, speaking in the most loving tones, she began to tell him of God.

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The Witch and the Fishmonger's Wife

by Angela Zeman

"You seem to be the only person I ever run into at this infant hour," the witch murmured, not disguising the sharp edge of her opinion of that fact. "Except your husband, of course." She examined the young woman standing two stories above her through eyes that only appeared sleepy and slowly added, "And the milkman."

The draperies of the witch's garments lifted in a sudden breeze. Her dark figure appeared doom-laden on the pale boardwalk already shimmering with heat.

The woman up on the flat roof of her house looked sourly down upon her fellow villager. The same breeze that disturbed the witch's clothing was the breeze the young woman had come to her roof seeking this morning, hoping to catch it for a few blissful minutes before descending into the heat and work of the day. The wind stroked one strap of her tattered nightgown from her shoulder, and she left it hanging. With a raw hand, she pushed back from her face a mass of black hair marred with dull patches. As soon as she took her hand away, the heavy hair fell back to where it had formerly hung. It was as if all the world held contempt for this woman this morning, including her own hair.

She perched her hands on wide hips and arched her ripe body up towards the strengthening sun as if her back ached, as well it might. The milkman had dashed from her back door seconds before the witch had arrived.

"Well, Ike has to get up early, no help for that," she merely said. Her expression was a dam behind which lurked many other things she preferred to say and the witch knew it.

Mrs. Elias's husband was one of the village's hardest workers, daily leaving his house before dawn to bargain with the fishermen for their catch as their boats first touched shore.

The sun moved higher, and the witch turned to keep from squinting, positioning herself for a clearer view of the woman on top of

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the house. Her mouth twitched into a semblance of a smile. "More credit to you for getting up with him, my dear. A devoted wife . . . "

"He likes a hot breakfast," she said dismissively. She turned her head towards the open sea and lifted a hand to shield her eyes. The young woman sighed when she glanced down again and found the witch still there.

"Your roses, they're doing well," the witch said.

"Well, thanks to your gardening advice," said the younger woman. She shifted restlessly in the growing heat.

The older woman's shoulder could be seen to shrug beneath the several folds of black gauze she liked to wear in public, however hot the day. Nobody knew if the material made up a robe, a dress, or was merely several yards of stuff wound around her tall, gaunt body. Nobody had the nerve to ask.

"You didn't need it. You seem to have acquired a touch for growing things. Your garden thrives, even now when everyone else abandons all effort in this heat. And I see you've added some things. Henbane? How enterprising. Did you know the hellebores you have there were used in old times to counteract witchcraft?" The witch gave Mrs. Elias a slow smile before resuming her inventory. "And lily-of-the-valley, I see . . . monkshood and the Christmas rose . . . you are attempting something not quite the usual. You'll give these lazy cottagers something to strive for." She eyed the younger woman with an interest that disconcerted Mrs. Elias.

"I put some foxglove for height against that wall, where the roses had been before you advised me to move them into the sun." Mrs. Elias wafted a lethargic hand at the narrow garden below. "I couldn't do those herbs and things you suggested, though. You know, to attract ladybugs to eat the aphids and the other pests. My husband complained that doing it that way was too time-consuming. So I have to kill the bugs with the canned stuff."

The witch sighed, for she loved the natural ways of doing things. "That's a shame. But it's understandable."

The fishmonger's house was a two story box, the living quarters arranged above the fishmarket, which took up all of the first story of the building. The garden made a bright barrier between the fishmarket and the boardwalk built above the burning sand. No tall trees shaded the miniature rooms on the top floor, and so they were uninhabitable during the day. Only the market at street level had an air conditioner and fans and wide shaded windows. It was

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as if the fish had to be comfortable but the people had been given no thought.

"Yes, roses grow bored with too much tender handling. They become lazy and begin to lose interest in blooming." The witch watched the heavy blossoms thoughtfully. "When they have to struggle a bit, it's good for their character . . . as you see." She looked questioningly at the young woman, who didn't look as if her own struggles had benefited her in any way.

"I just . . . early mornings don't agree with me, I guess," Mrs. Elias said, as if reading the witch's mind.

"No. You're lovely. No wonder your husband keeps you so tenderly beside him all day in his fishmarket. And how is Ike? His blood pressure behaving itself?"

"The heat is hard on him. I watch carefully to make sure he takes every drop of his medicine. He doesn't like to take it, you know." She made a wry face that only emphasized how delicate and pure her features actually were. "You know how men can get foolish about themselves, not doing what they're supposed to. Like it's an insult to their manhood to take care of themselves." She made a wifely click with her tongue.

The witch reached down and stroked the head of her cat, who had suddenly thrust open the lid of the basket on her mistress's arm. She was accustomed to ride within, swaying breezily along the boardwalk and peering through the holes in the wicker sides. She yowled in complaint at the long pause in the morning's entertainment, then huffily withdrew.

"Jezebel adores your husband. They share lunch every day in your shop, lovely pieces of salmon and bluefish, sometimes shark." The witch chuckled softly down at her pet. "She would be devastated if anything happened to your husband . . . if, say, he would carelessly forget his medicine or some such." She glanced piercingly at the strange garden, then up at the watching wife. She lifted a bony shoulder in a shrug, then suddenly turned to resume her walk. The younger woman's body sagged in relief, and she began to reenter her house. Suddenly the witch stopped and swerved around on her heel.

"Mrs. Elias." Though she didn't raise her voice, the element of command was so strong that Mrs. Elias heard her clearly and hastened to pay attention.

"Yes?"

"Does your husband like yogurt?"

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"What—why—"

"I noticed you two seem to consume a great many dairy products for a childless couple," the witch said dryly.

Mrs. Elias stiffened.

"I feel impelled to repay in a small way the generosity you and your husband display toward my pet. Jezebel has become quite pampered with his attentions, and I adore my Jezebel." She touched the small basket hanging from her lean arm briefly, but the object of her affection remained hidden and silent. "A yogurt pie, perhaps. A sweet dessert, but still healthy. Good for Ike and good for his waistline, too. I've noticed it isn't getting any smaller," she said. "Yes, or—" She laid a finger to her lips. "I shall think on it."

"No, please, don't both—"

But it was too late. The witch had continued her poised stroll down the exact center of the boardwalk and was now gone. After a puzzled moment, Mrs. Elias turned away and faded back inside like the shadows before the morning's sun.

A few days later the witch appeared again before Mrs. Elias, this time in the shop, late in the morning, when business was hectic. Mr. Elias sold not only fresh fish but also deli salads and cooked fish to the locals and the tourist trade. A huge cooler inside the door kept bottled and canned drinks icy. Ike's Fishmarket was a popular place around noon.

The bustle in the small market was dampened somewhat by the witch's appearance. After she slipped inside the door of the refreshingly cool room, she stood watching for a while, a pleasant smile on her face. After the first nervous moments, people resumed shouting their orders to Ike and reaching across each other to grab napkins and other items.

Mrs. Elias appeared wan and tired, but that was to be expected with the hours she kept. Often she would disappear into the back of the market, to reappear soon after with new salads to replenish the depleted bowls in the display case, or new buckets of ice. The customers soon learned to ignore the witch, merely nodding politely as they moved about or went out. Jezebel contentedly patrolled the floor in front of the fish cases, yowling with relish at the delicious odors, anticipating her treat at Ike's hands when the crowds slackened.

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As two o'clock approached, Ike gave a great sigh, wiped his ham-sized fists on a clean paper towel, and took a large covered plastic container from the cooler behind him. This he handed to his wife, who appeared not to want it, but he insisted, kissing her on the forehead. "Yes, you're getting too thin. You waste away before my eyes, and I want you healthy and strong." He patted her behind to hasten her away to the back room of the market. With a sigh she yielded, and as she went he added, "To please your Ike, okay, sweetheart? Just for me, eat it all."

Wiping his hands again, he turned, beaming, to confront Jezebel. Lifting three small silvery fish from the ice, he laid them on a china plate with a flourish possibly inspired by the witch's close scrutiny. "Sweet and fresh, just for you," he remarked. Jezebel greedily pounced, then began nipping at the fish with finesse. Glancing at the witch, Ike grinned. "She loves me only for my fish. If I stopped giving them to her, she'd never visit again and would break my heart without a second thought."

The witch began a leisurely approach to the counter. "That was very touching, just now."

"What, feeding the cat?"

"Feeding your wife. What was it? Is she ill, and is it medicine?"

The fishmonger waved away such suggestions. "No, no. She's just so pale these days, with the heat. I fix her lunch every day, just like she fixes my breakfast. It's only fish and pasta, with chopped potatoes, peppers, and vegetables. Things that're good for her. She's not as strong as me, and it's a lot of work, running this business every day, even with help. I take care of my wife."

"She's always seemed quite robust to me."

"It's just the heat, just the heat." Ike pulled his apron from around his immense middle and with the clean side of it wiped his face, which was red from exertion and sweaty despite the extreme coolness of the air in the shop. "Affects me, too. I try to keep her from working so hard, but she won't listen."

"I noticed how she tries to wait on customers, but you won't let her . . ."

Ike shrugged. "The men're rude, half of 'em. I won't have them talking to my wife that way."

The witch's eyebrows rose. "Asking for fish?"

"Yeah. They don't have any manners, those guys. Grinning at her. And the women are worse, they don't know what they want, most the time. Keep the rest waiting while they 'think.' She's got

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better things to do." He threw up his hands in disgust.

"And for the last month, instead of resting in the evening, she spends her time fiddling with those flowers in the yard. You'd think her whole future was invested in those things, instead of keeping herself for me and the work at the market here. The way she works over 'em, digging and poking and—" He reached behind him, brought out a pail of fish guts. "She even buries this stuff under them, can you beat that?"

The witch smiled. "I told her it was good for them. Makes this sandy barren soil better, Ike. Let her play with her flowers if it gives her pleasure."

Ike shrugged, then smiled. "What can I have the pleasure of getting for you today?"

"Nothing, my dear man. I just wanted to repeat what I told your lovely wife the other morning, how grateful I am for the kindness you show my greedy pet. She's pampered beyond belief by you every single day. And I want to show you my thanks by bringing you something—"

Ike held out a broad palm. "Not necessary." He ducked his head and grinned brightly. "Don't bother yourself, we enjoy Jezebel, just as we enjoy you comin' into the shop now and then. In fact—" he reached into a glass case and pulled out a fish fillet as big as a dinner plate. "You take this and have some nice fish for dinner tonight, on us. Our pleasure."

The witch waited while he wrapped the fillet in white paper and tied it with string, then took it from him and tucked it tidily into her basket. "You're a generous soul, Ike Elias. Many thanks. Well, I must be going. I should rush this fish home as fast as possible, it must be a hundred and one outside." She smiled archly at Ike. "I wouldn't want it to spoil."

He held the shop door open for her, and she bustled away, leaving the fickle-hearted Jezebel still at her lunch inside, with Ike.

As she rounded the corner of the market, however, after a swift glance at the baking beach and boardwalk, she stepped off the boardwalk to a concrete path that ran behind the market. After peering through two small windows that flanked a narrow door, she found what she was after—the sight of Mrs. Elias, perspiring heavily and stabbing with a fork into the large plastic container of Ike's hand-prepared lunch, which she held balanced on her knee. As the witch watched, she drank deeply from a large glass of iced liquid and sighed. She was sitting on a plywood crate as close to

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the window as possible to pick up the slightest breath of air that might stray into the dark room from outside.

The witch pecked at the screen with a long forefinger. Mrs. Elias jumped. "Yes?"

"Dear, aren't you terribly hot in there? Why don't you eat out front, where the air conditioning is?"

Mrs. Elias's mouth twisted wryly. "Because it's not good business to eat in front of the customers."

"Who said?"

Mrs. Elias just shrugged.

"Ah, yes. Well, at the very least, don't eat that stuff if you don't want it. It can't be settling on your poor stomach very well in the heat."

"I, uh . . . I have to eat it. Ike gets very angry . . . " She cast a worried look into the gloom in the direction of the shop.

"What, does he check?"

She shrugged a shoulder, but nodded. The witch looked her over for a few moments, took in her pale drawn face, her bowed shoulders, and the deep circles beneath the large black eyes that used to flame and sparkle with temper. She had to remind herself of Mrs. Elias's age . . . or lack of it.

"Look. I'm still going to bring your darling husband something to show my gratitude, but for you, my gift to you is to take something away. Let me have that." With a swift motion, she pushed aside the screen on its hinge, and before Mrs. Elias could react, the entire contents of the box were dumped into the witch's basket. "There." She handed the empty plastic box back to the stunned Mrs. Elias.

"Men can be incredibly impractical at times," the witch announced. "Now, don't say anything to him about it, he means well and we must consider his feelings. Agreed?"

Mrs. Elias nodded, too stunned to speak. Her eyes were enormous, and glistened almost feverishly.

The witch looked her over, then said, "You receive your lunch from him every day around now?"

Mrs. Elias nodded.

"And he always inspects to make sure you finished it all?"

Mrs. Elias nodded again, still speechless.

"I'll be here every day at this time. You wait for me if I'm late. Don't eat this heavy mess until the heat wears off the summer, and I'm betting you'll feel excellent for it."

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Mrs. Elias started to say something, but the witch held up her hand and said, "Hup! Never mind. See you here tomorrow. Not a word to Ike, remember."

For a week this continued, Mrs. Elias meekly handing over the contents of her large plastic container and the witch depositing it inelegantly into her basket, the whole process taking seconds. The witch would return to the boardwalk and continue on her way before anyone had a chance to notice that she'd been standing at the back window of the fish market. And daily, in the early hours, the witch would glance up at the roof of the fishmonger's house to observe the color gradually returning to Mrs. Elias's cheeks, and a lessening of the circles beneath her eyes. Always, before passing on, the witch would inquire pointedly about Ike's blood pressure and how well he was taking his medicine.

One day, as the witch disposed of Ike's well-intentioned lunch for his wife, Mrs. Elias, after hesitating for a moment, leaned close to the screen and whispered faintly, "I feel I owe you . . . Ike feeds your cat only because when you come into the shop, it makes him important in the eyes of the other villagers and brings him business. It isn't . . . it isn't . . . "

"It isn't because he just loves cats? I know, dear. But don't you think your loyalty should be to your husband? Like these horrendous lunches, he means well. I know it's difficult to be a wife, dear."

Flushing at the rebuke, Mrs. Elias drew away from the window and took her empty container back from the witch with only a faint "thank you."

Another week passed. Mrs. Elias's garden bloomed as if in sympathetic delight with the increasing wellbeing of its caretaker. The witch had gone home and consulted a manual of herbal lore the day she'd first disposed of Mrs. Elias's lunch, and never failed to consider the garden thoughtfully thereafter as she passed it on her walks. As Mrs. Elias's color, health, and garden continued to flourish, so did the worried look in the witch's eyes when she was home and unobserved by anybody but Jezebel.

After yet another week had gone by, as the witch observed the milkman again sneaking furtively back to his truck from Mrs. Elias's house, she signaled to him that she wanted to see him. After making an appointment with him at her home at dusk of that same day, she went on about her business.

That evening the milkman parked in a lane that stopped about a hundred yards from the witch's house. The air was much more

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comfortable here than in the village because of all the surrounding trees. He waited as he'd been instructed.

"Hello, Charlie."

He jumped, nearly falling because of the foot he'd left propped on the running board of his ancient panel truck. "Oh, hi, there, uh, Mrs. Risk. I came like you asked me to."

She smiled, eyes widening in surprised appreciation. "You remember my name. Few do." She studied him as he stood there in front of her, and while she did so, he leaned lightly against his truck. He had thick auburn hair and light hazel eyes that crinkled pleasantly in the corners, giving him a good-natured look. His mouth widened into a broad smile now, and his eyes twinkled intelligently at her as he watched her look him over. She admired the restraint he kept on the curiosity he must have felt.

"Well. At least it's understandable," the witch finally said.

"What is?"

"This attraction you seem to hold for half the village housewives."

He relaxed a little more. "That might be a compliment. It depends. Unless you mean what I think you mean."

"Oh, really?" Mrs. Risk studied him with increased interest. "And what do you think that is?"

"Oh, the old cliche. I'll bet that you, like most of the husbands in this place, think that just because I see their precious better halves in their nighties at the crack of dawn I'm itching to jump their bones while hubby's at work. How'm I doin', as a certain ex-mayor used to ask?" He folded his arms across his chest.

"Not bad. Are you implying that the truth of the situation is something different?"

"Truth is, most women look like coyote bait at that hour of the morning. Their husbands are welcome to 'em, with my heartfelt sympathy. Only about two women in this whole burg hold any attraction for me whatsoever, and they both have husbands who could chew new artwork out of Mount Rushmore for breakfast."

"So I take it you resist temptation."

"And will continue to do so until I feel suicidal."

She studied him thoughtfully for some more minutes while he waited patiently. His face betrayed his bafflement, but he seemed in no hurry to push for explanations.

"So all this running from the back door of Mrs. Elias's house each morning is merely to avoid personal injury at the hands of a

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THAT EVENING THE MILKMAN PARKED IN A LANE THAT STOPPED ABOUT A HUNDRED YARDS FROM THE WITCH'S HOUSE.

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husband who really has no reason to worry?"

He whistled softly. "In that one case, I'm in danger just for daring to sell her milk. When it comes to his wife, that is one mean ba—person."

"Have you had any actual confrontations with Mr. Elias over . . . Mrs. Elias?"

"Ohhh yes. I certainly have. Please. You don't want descriptions. I'm the only milkman in the area, and he insists on having everything delivered—from me, the grocer, the druggist . . . Otherwise, I'd never be allowed within blocks of that back door. Neither would the others. Just ask them. He tells us to come around, but he doesn't like it, so I'm in and out like a bolt of lightning. I never saw a guy go so nuts for absolutely no reason. Unless he could read my mind."

"Your mind in this case is not exactly classifying Mrs. Elias as . . . coyote bait?"

"Not even at ninety could that female be anything other than a wow. But besides being gorgeous, she's married." He shrugged. "I admire, maybe, but she's not available, to my mind."

"Scruples? Or self-preservation?"

He grinned. "Possibly a healthy dose of both."

"Well." She considered him thoughtfully. "I hope you'll consider a favor I'm about to ask you. It's going to involve your compromising your survival tactics a bit, I regret to say."

"And what's that?"

"Someone is in imminent danger of being murdered, and as distasteful as it is to me to get involved in others' difficulties, someone very dear to me will suffer if I don't. I thought of you immediately as a person who is in a unique position to help. You finish your work early, and so you're available. You're young, and you seem ablebodied. Your passable appearance is a bonus, but not necessary."

"Oh yeah?" His eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. He waited, but she added nothing to her request. "And you're not telling why, wherefore, or whereas?"

She laughed softly. He rubbed his forehead where for the first time she noticed faint freckles. "You've got a certain reputation, you know," he said. His frown contained a small element of alarm.

She shrugged.

He sighed. "I've always been a sucker for a pretty woman."

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"Oh my word," she said with a snort, but she'd plainly enjoyed the compliment.

"Okay," he said. "Dare I mention that you will then owe me one?"

"I owe nothing. I ask for this favor with no strings, depending merely on the measure of altruism present in most human beings. But I will take care of any necessary hospitalization."

He paled slightly. "Heh, heh. Funny you should mention that, but that's not funny."

She laid her long, graceful fingers across his wrist. "It isn't meant to be funny. And you're a fine man. A trifle shallow, but good-hearted."

"Never mind that stuff, just tell me the details before I chicken out."

"Well, to begin with, did you know that henbane, foxglove, lily-of-the-valley, and monkshood are all deadly poisons?"

He didn't, so she explained.

Two days later, the witch, bearing a napkin-covered tray before her like jewels of state, entered Ike's Fishmarket at the exact moment that the lunchtime crowd was at its peak. In triumph, she sailed across the damp floor, and as she presented him with the dish, she lifted the napkin away with a flourish. Revealed was a wide bowl filled with the stew that contains—with several varieties of fish and shellfish—chicken, sausage, spices, and a sauce on rice. A paella. And such a paella that filled the already odoriferous air with a rich, mouth-watering aroma.

The fishmonger, bursting with self-importance at this unheard-of attention paid him by the village's most fearsome resident, was beside himself with pleasure and called to his customers and his wife to come see.

Mrs. Elias came running. When she saw what her husband held in his hands, she immediately understood that here at last was the witch's gift she'd said she was bringing. So she added her thanks to his, although she was extremely relieved when the witch insisted that this dish was only for Ike, that no one else was to have so much as a taste. Ike's chest swelled at this added attention. Mrs. Elias smiled graciously and modestly stepped away from her husband, allowing him to be the center of the commotion. His voice vibrated with excitement and pride.

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At the witch's urging, he took a serving spoon and shoveled a great mound of it into his mouth, swearing with his mouth full that it was his favorite dish.

The atmosphere in the shop became like a party, and Ike demanded that everyone join him, on the house, with various cold drinks from his cooler and things to eat from his deli case. The noise level rose and rose in the small market as Ike plowed his way through the bowl of paella to please the witch.

When he'd nearly disposed of it all, he wondered out loud where she'd gotten all the fish and shellfish it contained. He didn't remember selling her any yesterday, or even the day before that. He stoked his mouth with the last spoonful. She murmured in reply that he had himself to thank for it, after all. When he raised puzzled eyebrows at that—his mouth being too loaded to open—she explained she had "borrowed" a few of Mrs. Elias's lunches he had himself prepared to provide some of the ingredients of the paella. After all, he always fixed his wife such an overwhelming amount each day, much too much for only one woman.

Mr. Elias froze. His massive jaws ceased to chew and remained poised in place like a great masticating machine from which someone had pulled the plug. The color fled from his perspiring, ruddy face. He stood there holding the dish close under his chin, in the center of his shop, in a shock his friends couldn't understand because the paella was no doubt as delicious as he'd said. Just as his eyes had reached the size of golf balls, he swiveled sideways, still not chewing or swallowing, to gaze at his wife. The moment he found her in the back of the crowd, he caught sight of the milkman seizing his bewildered wife and planting on her soft lips a kiss that would've brought cheers in the late night movies.

Ike promptly spewed the contents of his full mouth all over his disgusted customers, turned purple in the face, clenched his teeth, then reeled and hit the floor like a felled oak.

Days of hysteria, questions, and long testimonies fraught with suspicions and accusations later, Mrs. Elias attended the funeral of her husband. After a proper two more days, she installed an air conditioner in the upstairs rooms, where she then sat and spent hours doodling designs for a new sign proclaiming "Flower Shop and Nursery."

It wasn't long before she decided to visit the witch. She had a few questions she wanted answered.

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She waited at the end of the path where the milkman had waited with his truck, although she didn't know that, and felt sure the witch would know she was there and would come. And she did.

"It's the oddest thing. I can't help this feeling I have that somehow you're connected with the death of my husband. But I can't quite see how. Or . . . " She brushed glossy thick hair back away from her face. She sighed. "There was so much—so much going on that you couldn't have known."

The witch smiled. "On the contrary, my dear. There was much you didn't know yourself. I knew it all. Here. Have a little of this."

"What is it?"

"Carrot juice. You quite need building up. About that, your departed husband was quite right. Tell me, Mrs. Elias. When you began your new preoccupation with gardening, is that about the time Ike began his devoted lunch preparations for you?"

Mrs. Elias gazed with disgust at the orange liquid in her glass, then frowned off into the distance. The witch had taken her back to her house, and they sat on a bench beneath a huge shady tree. The breeze was pleasantly cooling. "You know, I think it was. Isn't that funny?"

"No, it's not funny at all. Didn't you tell me that he insisted that you use pesticides instead of the natural methods I suggested?"

"Oh yes. He said it was bad enough the time I already spent in the garden without doing extra stuff. He wouldn't permit it. What could I say? He went out and bought the chemicals for me, so I used them. I really didn't have any choice."

"Yes. That was another thing. You had no choice. You have no friends, either, I noticed. And you weren't even permitted to talk with people in the shop. You had things delivered to you, you didn't shop, didn't visit anyone, never went anywhere . . . I noticed."

Mrs. Elias stiffened. After a long silence, she said, "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm merely answering your questions. Here's a question for you. Did you ever have your 'lunch' analyzed by a pathologist? No, of course not. How silly of me, you weren't permitted to leave the house. Well, I did. They contained pesticides, not enough to kill you, but enough to make you ill. Increasingly ill, because the doses were gradually increasing."

Mrs. Elias's lips moved, but nothing came out.

"Ironically, it was only because of your wonderful constitution that Ike claimed to have been tending that you survived until I

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managed to get a good look at you that morning a few weeks ago. You looked so pale and drawn—"

Mrs. Elias made a small noise that suddenly exploded into high-pitched laughter.

"Oh, yes," agreed the witch. "I know that, too. What a collection of poisons you managed to cultivate in that garden of yours. I realized that I not only saved your life from Ike's loving stranglehold, but I saved you from throwing your life away by murdering your husband. Tell me. Why didn't you just try to escape along conventional means? Like talking to a divorce lawyer?"

Mrs. Elias gazed at the witch long and carefully. Then she said, "I really hate this carrot juice. May I have some of that wine you're drinking?"

"No, dear. Not until you're better. Give it another month."

Mrs. Elias sniffed at her glass and made a face. "To answer your question, because he said that if I ever tried to leave him, I'd be dead within the day. He said I was his, only his. He was terrifying. He never threatened . . . idly. So I believed him. I couldn't think of anything else to do."

They sipped composedly at their respective drinks. Finally Mrs. Elias said, "So you poisoned Ike with his own concoction?"

The witch looked scandalized. "Of course not. I would never make paella with days-old reheated food. For pity's sake. How disgusting."

"You mean it was all fresh and—and poison free?"

"Every bite. Ike's not the only fishmonger in town. How could I poison a living creature, anyway? How disgusting, making paella with leftovers. Those atrocious lunches. Tcha." The witch made a face.

"Then how did you kill him?"

"Kill him? I certainly killed nobody. It was his obsession with you that killed him. His pathological jealousy made him imprison you in that house and ultimately drove him to destroy you. He was afraid he couldn't hang on to you much longer, and if he couldn't have you, no one would. He knew about the milkman, you see."

Mrs. Elias began a protest that the witch held up a palm to forestall. "I know. I know there was nothing going on between the milkman and you. But to someone like Ike, just the mere existence on the same planet of another male was more threat than he could handle." She smiled suddenly. "You know, I've never agreed with that movie song that Sam played again. About kisses. Do you know

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the one I mean?" She glanced at Mrs. Elias, who gazed back with equanimity. "Charlie showed an unexpected flair, I thought.

"And don't forget: Ike had also just received the shock of thinking he'd swallowed a few days' worth of the poisons he'd been feeding you. I think by then he must have been adding fatal doses. I wonder what he thought when you kept living? Well, never mind. Fear plus rage, my dear, compounded by a macho stupidity he had of not taking care of his blood pressure properly. He killed himself."

Together they gazed out over the water companionably for a while. Then the witch said, "By the way, I think it's rather deplorable that the only thing you could think of to get yourself out of trouble was to murder. I think you need to learn other methods of surviving in this world, my dear."

Mrs. Elias smiled at the witch and stretched her young, robust, and not visibly depleted body. "Please don't call me Mrs. Elias any more. That name brings back memories of my stomachaches. My name is Rachel."

"Very well. Rachel Elias."

"No, just Rachel."

The witch nodded. "My name is Mrs. Risk."

"What can I call you?"

"You can call me Mrs. Risk, Rachel. Fetch me that volume by that log, dear. We have a lot to do."

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UNSOLVED
by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the January issue

Colonel Yussef Haddam, head of the Istanbul branch of Interpol, heard reliable rumors that an attempt would be made to assassinate Axel Sawdoff, a United Nations representative, in the airport. He personally intercepted Sawdoff at the plane and provided him with a bulletproof vest. It was a wise precaution.

From somewhere in the crowded airport a shot rang out. As people ducked for cover, Mr. Sawdoff discovered an unexpected hole in his shirtfront.

The colonel ordered his agents and the police to seal off the airport immediately. They discovered the pistol in a trash receptacle—minus fingerprints.

Wandering through the sea of faces, Colonel Haddam spotted four terrorists, known to Interpol only by their code names of Axeman, Butcher, Chopper, and Dagger. All four were taken into custody.

Under pressure, each made four statements. Omitting the curses and invectives, they are as follows:

Axeman:

(1) Mr. Katz is known as the Chopper.
(2) Hans did not come in the Corvette.
(3) Either Mr. Inge or Mr. Jinx is from Oran; the other hails from Pisa.
(4) Georg is from Milan.

Butcher:

(5) Chopper is not from Pisa.
(6) Franz is the first name of the Axeman.
(7) Either Axeman or Chopper is from Naples; the other is from Milan.
(8) Either Axeman or Dagger drove the Buick; the other arrived in the Dart.

Chopper:

(9) Dagger is neither Georg nor the driver of the Audi.
(10) Axeman does not come from Oran.
(11) Franz's last name is Katz.
(12) Dagger and I are Franz and Hans; but I'll not tell you who is which.

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Dagger:
(13) I am Mr. Jinx.
(14) Mr. Lenz came in the Dart.
(15) Butcher is Franz and comes from Pisa.
(16) Axeman arrived in the Corvette.

Nor would any of the four say more.

Colonel Haddam spoke to his lieutenant. "This makes no sense whatever. Find our faithful informer, Pepe the Peep."

A nervous Pepe was brought to Interpol headquarters and asked, "What do you know about the terrorists called Axeman, Butcher, Chopper, and Dagger?"

"Ah, very dangerous men, oh generous one."

"That we know," said Colonel Haddam. "But who are they? Where do they come from? And what kind of cars do they drive?"

The informer glanced anxiously about the room. "The very walls have ears, oh powerful one. It is worth my life."

"Yes, yes, but is it worth a hundred thousand dinari?"

Pepe hesitated only a moment. "This only I tell you: their first names are Elmo, Franz, Georg, and Hans; their last names are Inge, Jinx, Katz, and Lenz; they come here from Milan, Naples, Oran, and Pisa; and they drive an Audi, a Buick, a Corvette, and a Dart. And I need not tell such an intelligent man as yourself, colonel, they are all great liars."

"I suspected as much, my little friend. Now, look over these statements. Are they true or false?"

Pepe the Peep scanned the paper carefully—then read it again. "It would be fatal for a poor informer like myself to answer, sair. But I tell you this: of the statements made by each man, *only one is true;* the other three are *completely false.*"

"Your cooperation is appreciated," said Colonel Haddam, "and confidential." He tossed a hundred thousand dinari note onto the table. Pepe snatched it up, scurried out, and quickly melted into the crowd.

A search of cars in the parking lot disclosed that the Dart contained extra ammunition for the pistol, a map of the airport, and a photograph of the U.N. representative.

"Ah," said the colonel, permitting himself a sly smile, "Now I know. It is only a matter of time until my prime suspect confesses all."

Who was the would-be assassin?

See page 277 for the solution to the December puzzle.

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Nobody Wins

by Charles Ardai

Leon Culhane was one of those men you look at twice when they pass you on the street, the sort who looks as though he stepped off a poster for a horror movie once and couldn't figure out how to step back on again. He had the kind of face that would scare small children, and more than a few adults.

When he came into my office, he had to duck, and even so, the top of his head brushed the lintel of the door. I offered him a seat across from me, but we could both see he wouldn't fit in the chair. I only wished I had seen it before I had offered. He didn't take offense; he just leaned one elbow on top of my filing cabinet, put his chin in his hand and started telling his story.

I tried to listen without looking. I tried to—I couldn't. His face was flat, as though someone had smashed it with an iron, and when he talked, the words came out of a pair of lips that looked drawn on—they never moved. His eye sockets could have held golf balls with room to spare, and if there was an inch of skin on his face that wasn't pocked with acne scars, I couldn't see it. It wasn't a face you wanted to look at, but it wasn't a face you could do anything but look at, either.

When he came to a pause, I shook my head and asked him to start again. I hadn't heard one word.

"Carmine Stampada gave me your name," he said slowly, and this time I just looked down at my notepad and listened. "He said you know your way around a missing persons case, that you found his wife when she took off for the Keys."

"Yeah," I said. "I found her facedown in a swimming pool."

"You found her," he said. "Now I want you to find somebody for me. Her name is Lila, and she's my fiancée. I have a picture that I'll show you if you look up."

I looked. He held out a four-by-five still of a lovely girl with auburn hair. I couldn't imagine her marrying him in a million years. But imagining isn't my job. I handed the photo back. "Attractive," I said.

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He nodded. "Three days ago she told me she was going to her brother's for the weekend. She was supposed to be home this morning. She never showed up."

I looked at my watch. It was only twelve thirty. "Maybe she's stuck in traffic."

"Maybe she is," he said, "but the traffic's not on the way home. I called her brother, and he never saw her. He didn't know anything about her coming for the weekend."

I thought I knew what he was implying. "You think she—" how to put this delicately? "—headed for the Keys?"

He shook his head. "Not Lila."

"So what do you think happened?" I asked.

He squeezed his hands together, cracking some knuckles. "I think someone took her."

"And why do you think that?"

"I think that, Mr. Mickity, because when I woke up I found this on my doorstep." He reached into a jacket pocket, pulled out a velvet-covered jewelry box, and placed it on my desk. I had a feeling there was more in it than jewelry.

There was. A woman's little finger, severed between the first and second knuckles.

I closed the box before the bile that was crawling up my throat could reach my mouth.

"Lila's?" I asked.

"How the hell should I know?" Culhane walked up to my desk and leaned on it with both hands. "I hope the answer is no. But I'm supposed to think it's yes. I want to know why. I want to know who sent it, I want to know where my fiancée is, and I want you to bring her back."

"You realize," I said, "that it may very well be her finger. That there's a good chance she's already dead and that if she's not, she may have disappeared of her own free will."

"Well, that's what you're going to find out," Culhane said.

"Both of us," I told him.

Culhane gave me all the information he wanted me to have and left out all that he didn't, simple things like what he did for a living. He could have told me. He wouldn't have been the first Family man I've done a turn for. But he didn't know that I didn't have a wire in my pants or a brother on the police force or a Good Citizen complex cluttering up my head, so I couldn't really blame him for keeping a lid on his more questionable activities.

Of course, I didn't know for certain that that's what he

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wasn't telling me. For all I knew he earned his keep in some legitimate way, like opening doors in a ritzy apartment house, or babysitting. The fact that a man has Mafia written all over him doesn't make him a wiseguy any more than my looking like a P.I. makes me a detective. It's my license that makes me a detective, that and the fact that people are willing to hire me to find their fiancées. It was the bodies dumped in the East River that made Culhane a mob boy, that or maybe the broken kneecaps in Canarsie, or Little Italy, or wherever. That his hands had held a baseball bat, and not in regulation play, I'd have been willing to bet the agency on.

What else didn't Leon Culhane tell me? Things like where I could reach him after hours, how well-laundered the hundreds were that he was paying me with, what cute names his mamma had had for him when he was just a little Culhane, things like that.

What he did tell me was where I could find Lila's brother Jerome and, while we were at it, her sister Rachel. Culhane had called Rachel, to no avail, but I wrote her number down anyway. He gave me the number of an answering service that could get a message to him at any hour of the day as long as the hour was between nine in the morning and five in the afternoon. He gave me five hundred-dollar bills, each with its own serial number—I checked. And he gave me a stiff neck from looking up at him leaning over me for so long.

When he left, I got out the bottle of Excedrin I kept in my desk drawer, poured a few pills into a cloth handkerchief, wrapped them up, and then smashed them six or seven times with the butt of my revolver. I took the handkerchief into the bathroom, poured its contents into my toothbrushing cup, and filled the cup with cold water from the tap. I stirred it all up with the handle of my toothbrush and watched as the fragments pretended to dissolve.

I drank the medicine quickly, refilled the cup, and drank again.

I felt sick. Seeing a woman's severed finger is not my idea of lunchtime entertainment. To top it off, Culhane had left the finger behind. He didn't want it.

Well, I didn't want it, either. But I couldn't throw it away, I couldn't do anything with it, and I certainly didn't want to look at it. So I wrapped it in aluminum foil and stuck it in the freezer compartment of my

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office's miniature refrigerator. The velvet box, lined inside and out, was ruined by bloodstains. That, at least, I threw away.

I sat down to look over my notes. Lila Dubois, pronounced the un-French way, do-*boys*, soon to be Lila Culhane, had vanished. Maybe, I thought, she took a good look at the marriage bed she was climbing into and bailed out. If so, who could blame her? On the other hand, if so, where did the finger come from?

Could Culhane's rivals have kidnapped his fiancée? Sure. Kidnapping was their stock in trade. And the finger? Why not? If I could imagine Culhane cutting off a girl's finger, and I could, in a Bronx minute, it didn't take much to imagine his peers doing the same.

But "could have" is not the same as "did," and even if Culhane's rivals did send the grisly package, "why" was still a big question. Fingers usually come with notes of explanation. There had been no note with this finger.

No, it didn't add up—not yet. But Lila Dubois had to be somewhere. And someone had to know where.

Jerome Dubois answered the door in a Ralph Lauren bathrobe and slippers that must have cost a hundred dollars apiece. He had a tidily cropped beard and unhappy eyes that looked like they were looking at something they didn't want to see. Right now they were looking at me, but I didn't take it personally. Guys like this are unhappy looking at anything except their well-groomed faces in their gold-framed bathroom mirrors.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I am Dr. Dubois. Leon told me you were coming today." He lifted a cut-glass decanter from the minibar set up in one corner of the living room. "Port?" I shook my head. He poured himself a glass and carried it to the couch in the center of the room. He waited for me to join him before sitting down.

Then he waited for me to talk.

"When did you see Lila last?" I said.

He rolled his eyes back in his head for a second. "Oh, a week ago, two weeks. Something like that."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"Not really, I'm afraid. I have a terrible memory for dates."

"I'm not asking about the Civil War, doctor. I'm asking you did you see her last Tuesday or the Tuesday before that."

"I don't remember."

I waited while the doctor sipped his drink.

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"She didn't ask to come visit you over the weekend?"

"No."

"She didn't come here Friday night?"

"No."

"She wasn't here at all over the weekend?"

"No."

"You didn't talk to her—"

"No."

"—over the weekend."

"No."

We sat.

"Listen," I said finally. "Leon Culhane has hired me to find out what happened to your sister. I'd think you'd be interested in knowing this, too, except maybe you don't give a damn or maybe you know and just aren't telling me. That's fine with me. It's stupid, but it's fine. What is not fine is wasting my time, which is what you are doing. So why don't you just tell me what you're going to tell me and then I'll go find out how much of it is a lie?"

"I imagine," Dubois said, "that you find this approach effective when you deal with men in Leon's circle. I find it vulgar, personally." We stared at each other for a while.

"What do you do, doctor?" I asked.

"If you mean what do I do professionally, I have a successful private practice, in addition to which I spend a good part of each year preparing and presenting papers for seminars. I also teach a graduate-level course at Columbia."

"In the field of psychology?"

"Abnormal psychology, yes."

"And in your successful private practice, doctor, if one of your patients is uncooperative, what do you do?"

"I work with him to identify the root cause underlying this behavior and then eliminate it. But if you are implying that I am being uncooperative, you are mistaken. There are better ways I could be spending my time than speaking with a friend of Leon Culhane's."

"Leon Culhane's not my friend."

"Neither am I—nevertheless, I am spending the time. I am answering your questions to the best of my ability. I do not know where Lila is. That question I cannot answer. But if you have others, by all means ask them. I may not satisfy you, but it will not be because I am unwilling to cooperate."

"What do you think happened to your sister?"

Leon raised his shoulders and let them fall. "I don't know."

"I said what do you *think* happened. You don't know what you think?"

"I think she is fine."

"Why?"

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"Because she is always fine."

"But she's missing."

"She has been missing before."

"When?"

Jerome shrugged again. "Now and again."

"When?"

"When she was a teenager, Lila would disappear for days at a time. She would go off without telling anyone where she was going. Then, a week later, she would return and tell us all about it: I went to the Hague! I went to Bourbon Street for Mardi Gras! Vanishing is nothing new for Lila."

"When was the last time she took off like that?"

"I don't remember."

"Would Rachel?"

"She might."

I stood up, put my hat back on, and walked myself to the door. Dubois followed me with his eyes only. "I am sorry that I can be of no more help," he said.

"No, you're not," I said. "Don't lie. You don't do it well."

"You have a great deal of hostility, Mr. Mickity. Why is that?"

I opened the door and walked out. The door didn't swing shut on its own—it wasn't that kind of door—and I didn't pull it closed behind me. I looked back and saw Dubois still sitting on the couch, his arms stretched wide along the top, his glass dangling from one hand.

I walked. He could close the door himself, or he could let the flies in, I didn't care.

Rachel Dubois looked a lot like her sister, or at least like the photo of her sister Culhane had shown me. The same color hair, though Rachel's was cut short, and the same long, old-money face. Pretty, but offputting to a guy like me, and I'd have thought to a guy like Culhane as well. I couldn't imagine Culhane planting a kiss on lips like those with lips like his.

Rachel was a little friendlier than her brother had been. She took my hat and hung it on a brass peg, and then she took my coat and passed it to a tall man in a suit that hung on him like a shroud. She didn't introduce us, and he didn't make eye contact. I asked about him when we sat down.

"Oh, that's Maren," Rachel said, taking a second to dredge the man's name out of memory. "He's our valet. We couldn't function without him."

"We?"

"My husband and I."

I looked around. The walls were covered with portraits, but the only man in any of them was Dr. Jerome. "Your husband live here with you?"

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Rachel smiled. "Certainly. But he never paints himself."

"Your husband is a painter?"

Color rose to her cheeks. "No. My husband paints." By which she meant, *A painter is someone who paints for a living. My husband doesn't do* anything *for a living.*

"What does he do when he's not painting?" I asked.

"What does anyone do? What do you do when you're not . . . " The blush returned as she remembered that she was speaking with a member of the working class. "I suppose he reads. He chairs committees. He spends time with me."

"Does he spend any time with your sister?"

"Some."

"Does he spend time with Leon Culhane?"

"No."

"Will he, once they are married?"

A little shudder passed through Rachel's shoulders. "Lila will always be welcome here."

If she ever turns up, I thought. "Will Leon?"

"Excuse me?"

"Will Leon always be welcome here, too?"

"I will not bar my door to any member of my family, by blood or by marriage. But he will not be welcome. I'm sorry, Mr. Mickity. I imagine it sounds awful to you. I simply do not feel comfortable with that man."

It didn't sound awful to me at all. I'd have been surprised if she had felt comfortable with him.

"Lila is a headstrong child," she said, in an almost maternal tone. "She will have her way, whether the rest of us like it or not. She will marry that man —there is no way around it now—and she will suffer."

"Suffer? How?"

"Men like that make people suffer," she said. "That's their role in life. Don't think it doesn't extend to their families."

I thought of Dahlia Stampada, who ran away with a pug-nosed sweet-talker whose sole redeeming feature was that he didn't beat her up the way Carmine did. When he found out that Carmine was on his trail, he had shot her in the head and left her in a swimming pool. But at least he hadn't beat her up.

I remembered Carmine's expression when I told him that Dahlia was dead: no regret, no anger, just a sort of facial shrug. Dead was better than missing, since missing you can do with another man but dead you do alone.

And Leon had gotten my name from Carmine Stampada.

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"You're right," I said. Rachel's eyes opened a little wider at that, as though she felt a sudden need to reappraise me. "Leon Culhane is not the kind of man I'd want my sister marrying."

"That's very frank of you."

I shrugged. "I'm always honest. In my business, it doesn't pay to be a liar."

"If you feel that way about Culhane, why are you working for him?"

"I don't have a sister," I said. "I have nothing to worry about."

Rachel led me upstairs via a thickly carpeted staircase that made no sound at all when we climbed it. I think it was the first time in my life that I had climbed stairs that didn't creak.

The hallway was hung with more of Rachel's husband's paintings. The style was bland and conservative, the way you would have expected it to be. Horseriding foxhunters. Landscapes in the Everglades. Storm clouds over the Cape. At least the horses looked like horses and the clouds looked like clouds.

Rachel opened a door at the end of the hall and took me into a room furnished with a bed, a writing desk, a telephone, and a large dresser. The room was bigger than my office. "This is where Lila stays when she's here."

"When was she here last?"

"In June."

"How often did she normally come?"

"About once a month."

"Don't you think it's odd that you haven't seen her in three months?"

"Yes, I do. But a great deal has been odd since she started seeing Culhane. This is the least of it."

"Oh? What else?"

"Phone calls during which she sounded as though she was about to break into tears, but wouldn't admit that anything was wrong. Letters we would get from her that said things like, 'Darling, Leon and I are so wonderfully happy together!' She was trying to put on a good face, but she wasn't doing a very good job of it. I could tell she was unhappy."

"Why did she stay? Was she afraid of leaving him?"

"Wouldn't you be? She probably was. But really it didn't matter. You see, she's taken her stand with us, and she'd sooner go through all sorts of unhappiness with him than admit she was wrong. She'll go through with the marriage now no matter how wrong she knows it is, because she told us she would."

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"Except that now she's missing," I said.

Rachel didn't say anything for a second. "Yes, except for that."

"Do you know where your sister is?"

"No." It sounded like the truth, unfortunately.

"Your brother said that Lila has disappeared before, when she was younger. She went to New Orleans, he said."

"Yes, and to Amsterdam, and to Paris, and once to Greenwich Village. I think that little adventure made our mother most unhappy of all. Lila liked to travel, and of course, we had the resources to do it. She would occasionally just pick up her travel bags and go."

"When was the last time this happened?"

"When she was about seventeen."

"So not for quite a long time."

"No."

"Do you think that's what happened this time? Your brother seems to think it is."

"I don't know, Mr. Mickity. Maybe Jerome is right. I just have a bad feeling about it. If she comes back a week from now smiling and carefree, I'll eat my words. But I don't think she will."

"Why not?"

"Because I think that man did something to her. I know it makes no sense, because then why did he hire you, but in my heart I feel it. Tell me something, how much is he paying you?"

I thought about it for a second and then I told her.

"While you're investigating, could you do me a favor and do a little investigating of him as well? I'll pay you the same amount, and no one need know."

I almost told her that she didn't have to do that, that I would be looking into Leon Culhane's life as a matter of course. But instead I just thanked her, said yes, I would and took her money. There's honest and then there's stupid, after all.

"By the way," I asked her as she took me back to the front door, "what kind of doctor is your brother, exactly?"

"He's a Jungian psychiatrist. He specializes in devising therapy to repair what he calls 'antisocial disinhibitions.' That's as much of it as I understand, I'm afraid. Why?"

"I was just wondering." I thought of asking her whether his patients ever concealed important information from him, the way my clients do from me. Then I decided that the answer had to be yes, and if it wasn't she wouldn't know anyway.

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"Thanks for being open with me," I said. "It's a nice change of pace."

"Just find my sister, Mr. Mickity. Please."

The 17th Precinct is not the busiest in the city, but it's busy enough. When I looked in on my way back to my office, Scott Tuttle, my ex-partner, was on two phones at once. He was a big guy with a head that had always looked too small for his body; now that he'd lost the last of his hair it looked even smaller. With a phone at either ear and a stack of reports up to his chin he looked like more of a prisoner than the guys in the cage at the back of the room.

I took a Post-it note off his desk, scribbled on it, and added it to the stack in front of him. It said, "Back in a minute. Help with fingerprint?" He glanced at the note and nodded.

My office was just two blocks away. I went over there, took the foil-wrapped package from my freezer, and carried it back to the precinct house. Scott was only on one phone now, and when I dropped the package on his desk, he looked at it and said, "I'll call you back" to the person on the other end of the line. He hung up slowly.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"I want to run a print from it."

I followed him into a back room where he got out a stamp pad, unwrapped the finger, and rolled it in the ink. Then he pressed it down firmly on a piece of white cardboard, his thumb pushing on the nail and rolling it slightly to either side. He lifted the finger carefully and used a paper towel to wipe it off.

"What the hell is this, Doug?"

"It's a case."

"A case." He held the finger out to me. I didn't really want to take it, but I took it. "This is what you work on now? Someone cuts off a woman's finger and you carry it around in your pocket? I thought you left the force to get away from stuff like this."

"I thought so, too."

"So what happened?"

"You can't get away from it," I said. "It's everywhere." I wrapped the finger in the aluminum foil again.

"Jesus," he said. "What a world."

The library at 50th Street and Lexington was a one room wonder. To get there, you had to descend a flight of stairs into a subway station and then take a sharp left turn through a pair of doors so heavy I had trouble

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moving them. Past the doors was a windowless chamber with only enough room for six or seven rows of stacks, a checkout desk, and two computers. Whose idea it had been to cram a library in there, I don't know.

But one had been crammed in, and because it was so close to my office, I was probably its best customer. Not for the books—for the computers. A computer can be kept in a broom closet; if it's connected to the right source of information, it's still the most powerful tool in the world.

I ran all the names I had through the machine. "Lila Dubois" came up blank. "Rachel Dubois" got me a few newspaper articles, including the notice in the *Times* from when she got married. I hadn't realized that the Dubois family was as well known or as well-to-do as the article led me to believe. They weren't Rockefellers, and Rachel had certainly married up when she wed the scion of the Hoeffler clan, but they weren't exactly hurting for cash, either. Papa Dubois, the *Times* was careful to note, had been a prime source of funds for the Reagan reelection campaign. Mamma Dubois had the maiden name of Kelter, as in the Kelter Inn chain of hotels.

"Jerome Dubois" produced a long list of publications, including contributions to scholarly journals and books with impenetrable, forty-word-long titles. I dug up a few reviews of his work, one of which started, "If Jerome Dubois would spend more time in the real world and less in his head, he would surely have a different outlook on human psychology." There was also an article in *New York* magazine on the city's psychiatric establishment. The author of that article described Dubois as a "consummate theoretician" and "a zealous proponent of his ideas," which ideas he called "reactionary and barbaric."

I went to the stacks to see if I could find any of these reactionary and barbaric books, but that was asking too much. This branch hardly had two books to rub together, and neither was by Jerome Dubois.

Before logging off the computer, I also had it do a search on "Leon Culhane." None of what it found surprised me. Fourteen arrests. Two convictions. References to him in articles in the *Village Voice,* the *News,* and the *Post.* No books with long titles. No contributions to scholarly journals.

I dialed the number Leon Culhane had given me and left

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a message for him saying that I wanted to talk to him. I didn't have anything to tell him that couldn't have waited, but I wanted him to know what I had done. He called back in about ten minutes.

"Have you found her?"

I hate that question. "Not yet, Mr. Culhane. The search is still young. You get any more fingers?"

"That isn't funny."

"It's not meant to be. I think there's a good chance you'll be hearing again from the people who sent you the finger, especially since they didn't send a note the first time. They didn't send a note, did they?"

"No, they didn't. I told you."

"You did. I just wanted to make sure you hadn't found one since then."

"No."

I waited. Nothing came.

"Okay, in that case, let me tell you where I've been." I opened my notebook and made sure he could hear the pages turning. "I've talked to Jerome and Rachel. They don't seem to like you very much."

"Don't fool yourself, Mickity—they don't like you either."

"I'm sure they don't. But they seem to have a particular dislike for you."

"What's your point?"

"My point is that they think that if something happened to Lila, you're probably the one behind it. Now, I don't believe that's the case. But I want you to know that that's what they're saying."

"I don't care what they're saying. All I care about is where Lila is."

I flipped some more pages. "A friend of mine in the police department took the print from the finger. He'll run it through the computer and see what comes up."

"That won't help," Culhane said. "Lila never had her fingerprints taken."

"No, I wouldn't have thought she had. But maybe the person who lost that finger has. Assuming that it's not Lila's."

"Oh."

"Right: oh. We should have results on that in a day or two."

"Fine. What else?"

He didn't need to know I'd looked up his rap sheet. "That's it," I said. "I'll let you know if anything happens. And you'll call me if you get any more packages?"

"Yeah, I'll call you." He hung up. I took an Excedrin. It stuck in my throat, the way they always do when I'm too lazy to break them up. It took three shots of whisky to get it down.

I went to visit Carmine Stampada down on Mott Street. When I'd found his wife, he'd

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paid me handsomely and told me his door was always open. Since then, I'd never had a reason to see if that was true. This seemed like as good an occasion as any.

His face didn't exactly light up when he saw me, but my arrival didn't obviously make him unhappy, either. He disengaged from the conversation he was having with two slick-haired men who were about as tall and broad-shouldered as Leon Culhane and came over to pump my hand. I looked at the two men and suddenly realized how Leon must fit into this world. It was babysitting, all right—after a fashion.

The two bodyguards followed Carmine as he led me down the block to a trattoria called Intimo. They took a table near the front; we took one in the back.

"Sorry to bother you—"

"No bother. I needed to take lunch anyway. What can I do for you?"

"Leon Culhane," I said.

Stampada nodded. "So he did go to you. That's what I figured. When I saw you coming, I said to Jimmy, this is a good man, but I'll bet he is not just coming to pass the time with us."

"No, Mr. Stampada, I wouldn't waste your time like that."

"No waste, but go on."

"Who is Leon?" I asked.

"Who is Leon? Leon and me, we grew up together. Just a couple of blocks away from here, in fact. Leon's a good man."

"What does he do for you?"

Stampada gave me a tight little smile. "I know you're a trustworthy man, Douglas. But what a person does, you don't discuss."

"Does he do what Jimmy does, for instance."

Stampada looked over at his bodyguards. I didn't know which one was Jimmy, but it hardly mattered. "Leon's older. He's been through a lot more than Jimmy has. But yeah, more or less."

"Do you have any idea how he met Lila Dubois?"

"Of course I do."

A waiter arrived with two cups of espresso on his tray. He placed them on the table along with a glass of anisette for Stampada. Stampada took a sip from each.

"It was about—what?—five, six years ago? Six, I think. Leon was on his way home, it's maybe one o'clock in the morning, and he passes this guy and this girl making out in a doorway. Nothing so unusual about that, right? So he walks on. But one thing Leon's got is good hearing, and maybe five steps later he hears this girl making

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sounds and she does not sound like she is enjoying herself, you know what I mean? Now he could have kept walking. It's a big city; lots of people in it and you can't mind everyone's business. But he didn't keep walking. He turned around and went back."

He took another sip of espresso. "The guy had a knife to her throat. When Leon pulled him off her, her neck was all bloody from little cuts. The guy hadn't meant to cut her, but he was so excited he couldn't help himself. He slashed Leon across the forearm, and let me tell you, I saw it afterwards, that cut was down to the bone. But Leon picked the guy up—this is with blood pouring down his arm, remember—and he smashed that little bastard against the wall so hard that if I took you there right now you could still see the marks."

"God."

"That's how they met. A regular Harlequin love story, right? Leon took her home—his home—and they bandaged each other up. I didn't see Leon for a week. Then she disappeared back to her Cadillacs and her Riverdale mansion and Leon came back to work. I thought that was the end of it. But they stayed in touch. Just this year they started seeing each other again. Now they're supposed to be married." He finished the anisette in one swallow. "And that's the whole story."

"Except now she's missing and her family thinks Leon's done something to her."

"You tell them different. You tell them that's impossible," Stampada leaned forward. "Listen, I know this man, thirty-six years now I know this man, and this is a man who, I'm not telling you anything you don't know, has made more than one person wish he were dead. This goes no farther than this table, Douglas, but between you, me, and the lamppost, Leon Culhane has done some things to some people that even make me uncomfortable. And I am not an easy man to make uncomfortable. But I'm telling you Leon Culhane would kill himself before he'd hurt that girl. And if anyone else did anything to hurt her . . . let's just say I wouldn't want to be in that man's shoes for any amount of money."

"So what do you think happened to her?"

"I have no idea."

"Could it have been another woman, someone who was jealous of her? Someone who wanted Leon for herself?"

Stampada pointed to his bodyguards. "Look at Jimmy.

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There's a boy who never has to go to bed alone. And Aldo, maybe he's not so handsome, but he's big, and ugly he ain't. Those boys dress well, they comb their hair every day, they get looked at on the street. They carry big guns and they work for me. Now Leon carries a big gun and he works for me, but the only woman I ever saw look at him is Lila Dubois. Most people, when they see him, they just pray to God he's not looking at them. Leon's not a pretty sight, Douglas. He's a damn good man, loyal, but he's also ugly as sin. Until he met Lila, there'd never been any woman in Leon's life—and if you don't find her, I have a feeling there's never going to be another."

"Then could it be someone who's trying to get at you?"

"What, through Leon?" Stampada shook his head. "Or did you mean someone who wants his job? No, then they'd just kill him. Or try to. Why take the girl?"

"Then who would have done it?"

"You're the detective," Stampada said. "If I could answer that, we should trade jobs."

I got two things from Stampada before I left. The first was Leon Culhane's address in Hoboken. The second was a promise that he wouldn't tell Leon he'd given it to me. I didn't want Leon to know I was poking around in his life.

On the bus over to Jersey I thought about what Stampada had told me. The man was not known for his honesty in general, but everything he'd said to me had the ring of truth. He'd had no reason to lie.

Culhane was as violent and unregenerate a sociopath as any I had met. That's what Stampada had been telling me in his careful, delicate way. Here was a man who had no friends and no lovers, who'd spent his life feared and hated, and who had been good enough at what he did to earn the respect of one of the most violent capos in the Mob. Leon Culhane was probably a killer many times over, and worse things, too.

He was also in love.

Was this possible? Could it be that this monster was tame in the presence of Lila Dubois? Could Rachel have been wrong? Maybe. Maybe.

The bus let me off next to a video arcade. I crossed to the other side of the avenue, away from the beeps and lasers and the sound of quarters being gobbled up, and turned down a side street. All the houses here looked the same. This was the

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border between the good and the bad parts of Hoboken: good enough not to be slums, but not good enough to keep from being crammed with identical prefabs. Some of the houses had building numbers; others had lost theirs. I consulted the slip of paper on which I had written Leon's address and made my way slowly down the block.

It was only by counting doorways that I figured out which one was 1317. It was a two story rectangular box with a cinder block foundation and pale blue siding. The roof was gabled, and the drainpipes were rusty. There were no curtains in the windows. The lawn was patchy, but well-kept.

There was a row of cars parked in the street, and I kept them between me and the house the first time I passed. I chanced a glance in one of the windows. I didn't see anyone.

I went back, this time walking on the sidewalk, going slowly, looking in each window. The rooms looked comfortable, though they didn't have much in the way of furniture. The kitchen was well stocked with sixpacks, and I saw a shotgun leaning against the refrigerator.

I rounded the corner, hoping to get a look at the rest of the house and maybe even find a way inside. Instead, I got a look at another shotgun, the twin of the one I had seen in the kitchen. This one was pointed directly at me. It was in the unsteady hands of a man who, though both tall and ugly, was not Leon Culhane.

"Step back, put your hands up, and don't even think of trying to run," he said.

I stepped back until my back was against the wall of the house. I put my hands up. I thought about trying to run but tried not to let it show. "My name is Douglas Mickity," I said. "I'm a private investigator. I was hired by the owner of this house to—"

"Like hell you were," the man said, jamming the barrel of the shotgun under my chin. "I'm the owner of this house, and you're sure as hell not the P.I. I hired. Now you start talking or I'll blow your head off."

I felt the metal at my throat, pressing against my Adam's apple. "I was looking for Leon Culhane's house. Thirteen seventeen." I opened my left hand and let him see the slip of paper in it. The shotgun wavered at my throat, brushing my chin. "Leon Culhane hired me to find his fiancée. That's the truth."

"So why do you want to go snooping around his house?"

"I don't know." My mind was racing for an acceptable an-

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swer. "To be thorough. To make sure he didn't miss anything."

"What agency do you work for?"

"I work for myself."

"Take your I.D. out and show it to me," he said. "Slowly."

I did what he said. He looked at my driver's license and my investigator's license. Then he lowered his gun. I started to breathe again.

"Sorry," he said. He turned away and started walking toward the back porch of his house.

"Hold on," I called after him. "What did you mean 'You're not the P.I. I hired'?"

"Just what it sounds like," the man said. "I hired Arthur Chase. You're not him. When you said you're a detective, I thought maybe you work for him. But you don't, so that's that." He opened the door and waited for me to leave.

"Can you at least tell me which house is Culhane's?"

He nodded toward the house behind me.

"And your name?"

"None of your business."

The door banged shut behind him.

I rubbed my throat. I could still feel where he had held the gun on me. I had accidentally miscounted houses, and for that simple mistake I had almost gotten killed. Scott's words came back to me: *Jesus, what a world.* Two houses picked at random in Hoboken, New Jersey, and both of the owners had hired detectives, both had guns, both were willing to use them. . . . No, it didn't matter whether you were on the force or not. You couldn't get away from it.

I went down the block to Culhane's house. It was a little better furnished than the other house, his lot a little worse maintained. There was a small stack of mail at the front door. I looked through it. Most of the mail was addressed to Leon R. Culhane, but two envelopes were addressed to Howard Gross at 1319 and a supermarket circular was addressed to Sheila Hanover at 1315. So I had been speaking to Mr. Gross—or Mr. Hanover, if there was a Mr. Hanover.

There was more I could have done if I hadn't been so jumpy, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Mr. Shotgun, whatever his name was, was peeking out at me from between his Venetian blinds.

I took one last look at the doorstep where Culhane had found the finger and then I headed back to the bus stop.

My first stop in the city was at 41st Street and Fifth Avenue: the Mid-Manhattan Li-

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brary. I used one of their computers for a few more database searches, and I found something under "Hanover" that caught my eye. It was a newspaper article from a few weeks back. I printed it out and took it with me.

But the main reason I was there was not for the computer. I went through the stacks until I came to the D's. Of five books listed in the card catalogue, only one was on the shelf. I took it.

I also went back to the 17th Precinct. Scott dug through his files while I read the PBA announcements tacked above the Quik-Cool Ice Cream Bar Machine. Eventually he turned up the print match he'd run for me.

I promised Scott dinner at the restaurant of his choice. In return, he told me whose finger I had stashed in my office icebox.

It wasn't Lila's.

The book was fascinating. I tore through it the way some people read potboiler mysteries and others the sports pages.

Its title was *Strategies for Mental Retrogression*. The title was followed on the book's cover by a subtitle of three or four lines, the gist of which was that psychology had taken a wrong turn some time around the middle of the century, and that we would all be better off if we stopped coddling the mentally ill and went back to reliable methods of treatment such as straitjackets, wet-ties, electric shocks, and lobotomies. It was a book calculated to shock and titillate its audience of white-coated academicians, whom I pictured reading it under the covers with a flashlight.

I didn't understand half the words, which I'm sure was the point of his using them. The half I did understand kept adding up to such hogwash that I wanted to throw the book down the incinerator chute and start fresh with a good Robert Ludlum or Lawrence Block. But I didn't. I made it all the way from the first chapter, about making the insane aware that they are insane, to the last, which said that if all methods of treatment were unsuccessful, one should incarcerate the mad person until, inevitably, new methods are developed.

The text was peppered with cheery anecdotes, most about well-intentioned but naive psychiatrists who started out by asking their patients for input into their therapy and ended up roasted on a spit, strangled with their stethoscopes, or chopped up into little bits. On the other side were case studies that showed how electroshock

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helped Clara S. lead a normal life and how being restrained for a solid year turned Allan G. into a productive citizen.

I took the book along with me on the train up to Riverdale.

When Jerome came to the door, I asked him to autograph it. He almost smiled, then saw that it was a library book and frowned. He stared into my eyes, as though trying to pry open my odd, aberrant psyche. "Is this a joke?"

"No joke. I read the book. It's very impressive."

"*You* read the book?" He said this in a tone that suggested that what he really wanted to say was, You can *read?*

"I did. Cover to cover. Didn't get all the fine points, I admit, but the generalities sank in very nicely, thank you. Do you think I could come in?"

He stepped back from the door. "Suit yourself."

I suited myself and shut the door behind me. Jerome retreated to the couch. He did not offer me a drink this time. Maybe something in my eyes told him not to.

"Has Lila come back?" he said.

"I think I've found her."

"Really?" Jerome drummed his fingers on the back of the couch. "Delightful. I'm very glad to hear it. Please ask her to telephone sometime and tell me all about where she has been."

I shook my head. "Why bother? I told you you're a terrible liar."

"What am I lying about?"

"What are you lying about? Mister, if you told me your name, I'd want to see a birth certificate to confirm it."

Jerome extended a finger toward the door. "On second thought, no, you can't come in. Get out of my house."

"What, and skip my lecture?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Case study: Jerome D.," I said. "Here we have a respected doctor from a more than respectable family. He didn't marry into money the way one sister did, but he went to a prestigious medical school and he has plenty to keep himself fed and clothed."

"Get out of my house."

"Jerome and his two sisters received the best of everything and, what's more, they had identical upbringings. So how could it have happened that while two of the siblings turned out as might have been predicted one went so horribly wrong?"

"If you don't get out this second, I'm calling the police." He grabbed the phone.

"Put the phone down," I said. His face went pale. I raised my

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gun to chest level. "I have six bullets in here, and I only need one. I'd go to jail, but so what? I've been there before."

Jerome's hand, suddenly a bloodless white, was still clenched around the receiver. We could both hear the dial tone's purr.

"Put the phone down. Or do you want to bet on whether I could miss six times at this range?"

He put the phone down.

"Now sit down."

He sat down.

"Case study: Lila D.," I continued. "A thankless little renegade from adolescence on. Ran away on pappa's charge card while Jerome and Rachel were behaving the way proper young adults should. Ran away to New York City and almost got herself raped. Took up with a Mafia thug. Lost her blueblood virginity to a man almost twice her age whose profession is making people beg for him to stop. Had the temerity to fall in love with this man and to be suckered by his sly impersonation of a normal human being. Wouldn't be talked out of it for love or money—and you probably tried both. What could account for this? How could one third of the same seed that bred you turn out so . . . so . . . dare I say, crazy?"

Sweat was pooling around the collar to Jerome's robe. His hands were at his sides. His eyes were riveted on my gun.

"I know what happened, Jerome. It isn't that hard to figure out.

"You tried to reason with her. You suggested she seek help. You tried to make her aware of the obvious insanity of her plan. How could a sane woman dream of marrying Leon Culhane? But she wouldn't budge. She insisted that she loved him.

"So you invited her down here for the weekend, and when she arrived, you did what any good psychiatrist would do, if only—how did you put it?" I opened the book and found the page I was looking for. " 'If only proven therapeutic methods had never to answer to the sobbing, pitiful wail we call conscience, then psychiatry would no longer be a hobbled science. It is as though we asked a surgeon, prior to his making the initial incision, to pause to consider whether he would want himself similarly cut open. Steps must be taken; the ill must be cured; nothing should stand in the way.' "

I closed the book.

"Where is she? Where have you locked up your sister, doctor?"

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"You are wrong." He spoke in a whisper.

"Don't make me search this place, or you won't recognize it when I'm—"

"She is not here," he whispered. "Search if you like."

"Then where? Did you stick her in one of the hospitals you consult with?" I aimed the gun at his legs. "I'm no Leon Culhane, but I think I can figure out how he gets people to tell him things before they die. I might make a mistake, and hurt you more than I'd like to, but what can I say? I'm not an expert. Talk. You've got three seconds."

He didn't even wait for me to count to two. His head dropped, and I thought I saw tears well up in his eyes. I know I heard them in his voice.

"Your analysis was admirable," he said. "You would make a good psychiatrist. But I am afraid your conclusion is incorrect. Yes, it was quite clear that Lila was afflicted. Unfortunately, in this case her madness threatened not only herself, but her sister and myself as well. It threatened the good name of my family. It threatened my professional reputation. Can you imagine what effect it would have on my standing in the community to have it known that my younger sister is insane? Even if I were treating her for it?" His voice was a ragged wail. "Never mind insanity—can you imagine what it would have meant for a Dubois to marry a gangster?"

Jerome rose slowly from the couch and extended his arms toward me, as though he expected me to slap a pair of handcuffs on him. "I didn't abduct her. She came of her own free will. But she wouldn't listen to reason. There was no other choice. I couldn't risk incarcerating her. So I killed her."

"Oh, please don't say that." Now I was the one whispering.

"I did," Jerome said. "I forced myself to overcome my internalized inhibitions. I had to."

"You poor man," I whispered.

I closed the door behind me this time.

Leon Culhane arrived at my office a little after eleven. I had my radio on. When he came in, I turned it down low. I didn't turn it off. Somehow I didn't want mine to be the only voice in the room.

I hauled out the foil-wrapped finger and showed him the printout Scott had given me. The finger belonged to Liana Hanover, daughter of Anthony and Sheila. According to police records, the Hanovers had reported their daughter missing

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two weeks earlier. According to the newspaper articles I'd found in the library, the parents had had no contact from the kidnappers.

Except that they had—the kidnappers had just left their grisly package on the wrong doorstep by mistake. And had they left a note with it, one that blew away in the morning wind? Who knows?

I told Leon that I would be sending the finger to Arthur Chase and that I would leave his name out of it.

Leon listened to this impassively. It was not Lila's finger; this was good. But maybe in my voice he could hear that this was the last of the good news, because he showed no relief.

I told him.

I told him the whole story, I showed him Jerome's book, I explained what had been going through Jerome's head. Culhane stared me in the eyes through every word of it, showing no sign of anger, grief, or pain.

After a while I ran out of things to say.

"Job well done, Mr. Mickity," he said. "You earned your money." He turned to leave.

I stopped him at the door with a hand at the small of his back. I felt him recoil at my touch. "Please," I said, looking up into his enormous eyes, "don't hurt him too much."

"I couldn't possibly hurt him too much," he said.

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Marcel Sieurac's Murder

by Erich Obermayr

The opening at Galerie Lefèvre was a listless affair. The artist, Marcel Sieurac, was an unknown, and his work was very ordinary. With only one exception, the luminaries of the Paris art world were unanimously absent, and the small crowd that was there was more interested in consuming the free refreshments than in viewing the paintings.

The gallery's location was partly to blame. True, from its doors on Boulevard de Rochechouart one could throw a rock in any direction and hit an artist, or at least someone standing in a drafty room before a canvas, with brushes and palette in hand. The attics and crannies of Montmartre's creaking old buildings, which hunkered shoulder to shoulder up and down the steep streets, had been partitioned into hundreds of tiny studios. But their inhabitants could seldom afford an afternoon glass of wine, let alone the price of even a cheap painting. The buying of art was the purview of more prosperous citizens, and they seldom wandered north of the Grands Boulevards.

The true connoisseur did keep an eye on obscure little galleries like Galerie Lefèvre, in case some undiscovered genius happened to hang his work on its wall first. Mrs. Poll was a true connoisseur. She was also Paul Aichele's nominal housekeeper. That is, she did some cleaning on Mondays and Thursdays but only because, as she said, those afternoons would otherwise be insufferably dull. Aichele was not a connoisseur, although he never lacked an opinion about a painting. When Mrs. Poll invited him to the opening at Galerie Lefèvre, he gladly accepted.

On the way, Mrs. Poll mentioned that the young Henri Berhard had first exhibited at Galerie Lefèvre, but once they arrived she was first to admit that Marcel Sieurac was no Henri Berhard. His work consisted of city scenes, meticulously true to their subjects but also very stiff, especially in their human figures, which looked posed even though they

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AICHELE'S ATTENTION WAS DRAWN TO A PIECE OF PAPER LYING ON THE FLOOR.

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were supposedly engaged in everyday activities.

It took Mrs. Poll only one pass through the exhibit to exhaust whatever potential it had for her, but Aichele found himself enjoying the familiar Parisian sites the paintings presented. And like himself, the artist had taken more than a few long strides down the road of middle age. This was a point in his favor. It was also impossible to watch unsympathetically as Sieurac responded with smiling pleasantries to the vacuous comments of those low echelon denizens of the art world who were there.

The one person of importance was a M. Boucherot, who, Mrs. Poll explained, not only wrote artistic criticism for *Le Figaro* but authored an immensely popular weekly serial in *La Gazette de France* under the nom de plume of "Antonin." The fact that "Antonin" and M. Boucherot were one and the same was, by M. Boucherot's design, one of the worst kept secrets in the city's artistic circles.

It was hardly necessary to point him out, since he was holding court in the center of the gallery. The group around him was never smaller than the little knot of spectators around Sieurac. He left after a few minutes, and took most of the crowd with him.

The event had been under way for some time when Aichele and Mrs. Poll arrived, and it seemed to be on the verge of simply ceasing to be, without a ripple of ceremony. Mrs. Poll suggested they adjourn for drinks and, courteous as always, surprised both Sieurac and M. St. Cloud, the gallery owner, by inviting them, too.

M. St. Cloud was a doleful, dark-haired man who had attended the opening in a black frock coat. He declined the invitation, looking appropriately weary and explaining there was work to do yet in closing the gallery. Sieurac, in contrast, readily accepted, and suggested Café Dancourt, half a block north on the square of the same name.

To describe Café Dancourt as a hole-in-the-wall would conjure too expansive an image. It consisted of one tiny, gloomy room a few steps below street level. The light was feeble, and the tobacco smoke was thick. Sieurac was instantly recognized, and greeted loudly by the waiter and several customers. They were directed to the premier table, although once the three glasses of beer they ordered arrived, there was no longer room for them all to rest their elbows on it.

Sieurac emptied his glass in the time it took Aichele to light

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the cigarette Mrs. Poll had taken from her handbag. It was just as quickly refilled. The alcohol eased the furrows on Sieurac's brow and lightened whatever care it was that had kept his mouth so downturned at the edges. He even looked younger than he had appeared at the gallery, and he was most definitely more at home at Café Dancourt.

"And so what brings you to our little *faubourg* today?" Sieurac asked, to begin the conversation.

"Your exhibit," Mrs. Poll answered.

"Come now. All the way out here to see the work of a nobody?" Sieurac drained his second glass and wiped his lips with his sleeve. "If that's so, what was it you liked so much about my paintings?"

"I did not say I liked them," Mrs. Poll answered.

"That's right, you didn't." Sieurac turned toward the waiter and called for another glass of beer.

"I did rather like some of your work," Aichele said. But his comment was too hesitant, and betrayed the difference between a personal opinion and a judgment of true quality.

"Which ones?"

"*View of Pont Neuf* for example."

"Oh?" Sieruac sounded skeptical. Then, dismissing the whole thing, said, "You're not drinking. Maybe you'd rather have cognac. If so, you're out of luck. They water the liquor here."

"The beer is fine," Aichele said, observing that he and Mrs. Poll's glasses were actually almost empty, and that a suitable exit would then present itself. But before he finished the thought, the waiter had refilled them from a large enamel pitcher.

"Have you ever heard of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, of Lyon?" Sieurac suddenly said. He did not wait for an answer. "At my age, he had exhibited in all the best galleries, and now he's somewhere basking in the sun. And do you know what? The only reason anyone ever looked twice at anything he did was because of all those articles that idiot Guerin wrote about him. And do you know why Guerin wrote what he wrote? Because Puvis de Chavannes was Countess Mategna's lover, and Guerin thought that if he praised Puvis enough the countess would eventually invite him to her salon. He must have written twenty articles, trying to get her to notice him."

"Did she?" Mrs. Poll asked.

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"Of course not," Sieurac said, as if she should have known. "But everyone in Paris found out who Pierre Puvis de Chavannes was."

"The critic M. Boucherot was at your opening," Aichele volunteered. "Perhaps there will be something said in *Le Figaro* about you."

"He was at my first exhibit and never wrote a word. Not even an insult." Sieurac made a pained smile. "He only comes because an opening provides an audience for his pontifications. Are you hungry? They boil cabbage here. If you're lucky, you even get a morsel of ham. How about it?"

Before either Aichele or Mrs. Poll could answer, their attention, and the attention of everyone else in the room, was drawn abruptly to the entryway, where a very intoxicated woman made an entrance befitting the stage at the Variétés. She swept in at top speed, opened her arms to the room, then dropped them quickly to her sides as her bleary gaze settled upon Marcel Sieurac.

She did not waste a moment of the crowd's attention. "Good evening, dear husband," she said loudly.

The features of her face were bulky and prominent. Her eyes were narrow, crowded between her thick brow and high cheekbones, which were reddened to match the startling hue of her lipstick. Her skin was rough, even under its veneer of makeup.

"I take it your opening was such a success that you have come to Café Dancourt to pay one last visit before moving on to more rarefied establishments. Tell me, do we have a new address in Saint-Germain? Should I pack my things? Or will you simply buy me an entire new wardrobe?"

Sieurac glared at the woman, angry but forlorn at the same time. The others took in the spectacle with either surprise or amusement, or both. Then the woman released them, striding unsteadily to the bar and saying in a soft voice, "A drink, please."

"We were planning on dinner at the Chat Noir," Mrs. Poll said to Sieurac, bringing his attention back to the table. "You are welcome to join us."

"The Chat Noir is filled with *poseurs* and half wits," he answered bluntly.

"But the shadow-shows are said to be quite imaginative."

"Shadow-shows? That's what it has come to. Shadow-shows. I have no desire to go to the Chat Noir and see shadow-shows."

"Then, it has been a pleasure, monsieur," Aichele said, standing quickly.

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Mrs. Poll rose more slowly. "Good evening, M. Sieurac. I wish you the best of luck."

The woman stood at the bar but turned her back as Aichele and Mrs. Poll passed. Mrs. Poll gave the waiter an extra ten francs so Sieurac's evening could go on as long as he wanted. The door was closing behind them when Aichele happened to turn and look back into the cafe. He saw through the smoky lamplight that the woman had planted herself squarely in Sieurac's lap. She held his chin in the palm of one hand and rested the fingertips of the other against his cheek.

It was a five block walk downhill to the Chat Noir.

"Isn't it true that all great artists lead tempestuous lives?" Aichele said.

"You could say that. But all artists who lead tempestuous lives are not great artists."

"Of course. But I honestly do like *View of Pont Neuf.* And I just might buy it. The prices in Galerie Lefèvre are certainly right."

"A true reflection of the value of the work, in my opinion. If you hung *View of Pont Neuf* on the wall with five other paintings, it would be the last one anybody would notice."

"I would not buy it to attract attention. It is a competent rendering of the Pont Neuf. Granted, it is not a Renoir, but that is just the point. I might enjoy looking back someday at what the Pont Neuf actually looked like in 1889."

"Then buy a photograph."

"It is not the same."

"Well, you are right about that. But personally, I prefer the view of the Pont Neuf which I carry in my mind's eye to either M. Sieurac's work or a photograph."

They arrived at the Chat Noir. The frosted glass of the double doors fairly throbbed from the excitement within. By the standard of Montmartre nightlife, they were absurdly early, but lucky to get a table. "Phryne" was the night's presentation, although any story would have played to a capacity crowd. M. Rivière's shadow-shows were the absolute sensation of the city.

Monday afternoon of the following week, Mrs. Poll arrived at Aichele's flat on Rue St. Severin and was about to begin the dusting. He diverted her with a glass of red wine.

"There have been some interesting developments with regard to our artist friend M. Sieurac," Aichele said. "His wife paid me a call the very next day after our meeting. She is really quite pleasant when

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she's not in her cups. Some of the hangers-on in Café Dancourt knew who I was, and my profession, probably from my days at the Préfecture. And it so happens she is confronted with a matter requiring the services of a private detective. Namely, she thinks her husband is being swindled by M. St. Cloud."

"It would not be the first time an artist was taken advantage of by a gallery owner," Mrs. Poll said. "What is it that makes her suspicious?"

"The exhibit we saw is Sieurac's second at Galerie Lefèvre. The first was about eight months ago. All the pieces in the first exhibit were sold, and almost all the work in the current show has been sold as well. Yet despite this apparent demand for Sieurac's work, M. St. Cloud continues to set extremely low prices for it. Ridiculously low, according to Mme. Sieurac. And of course her husband's share is proportionately meager. She suspects M. St. Cloud is up to something, but has no idea what. Her husband is reluctant to press the issue, but she did persuade him to ask M. St. Cloud for a list of the buyers, which, oddly enough, he keeps saying he will produce but somehow never does. Coupled with the fact that the gallery is almost always empty, as you could predict from the small showing at the opening, I think she has a right to be suspicious. I told Mme. Sieurac I would look into the situation, and that definitely includes asking your opinion of the matter."

Mrs. Poll shrugged. "There are any number of ways M. St. Cloud could cheat Sieurac. He could actually charge the buyers much more for the paintings and pocket the difference, though that is highly unlikely. I seriously doubt that Sieurac's work could ever fetch more than the prices M. St. Cloud has set for them. It is probably all just a coincidence. On the one hand, the Sieuracs have high expectations, and on the other, the apparent demand for his work might well be the result of the same low prices they are complaining about."

"Well, I did visit the gallery again," Aichele said. "And indeed, most of the work was sold. Of course M. St. Cloud was not about to tell me who any of the buyers were. In fact his whole attitude was downright rude, even though I made it abundantly clear I wanted to buy a painting."

"*View of Pont Neuf,* I suppose?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. But it is not available. And all the time I was there, not a soul

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came in. Does that mean M. St. Cloud sells the paintings after hours?"

"That is possible."

"But so many?"

"It is odd, I admit."

"The next step was to talk to Sieurac himself. I decided to pay a visit to his studio, the location of which I learned during a brief stop at Café Dancourt. I had an engagement already scheduled for that afternoon, so the visit did have to be arranged for a later time. I have since then sent him two messages, asking for an appointment, and received no reply. So I plan on making an unannounced visit later today, and if you think it would be more interesting than dusting, you are invited to join me."

Mrs. Poll did have her sympathy for Sieurac, but the low esteem in which she held his work was shown by the time she took thinking the proposition over, and that she agreed to come only if they also stopped at Cimetière Montmartre to put flowers on the grave of an actor she once knew.

The walk from the omnibus stop on Boulevard de Rochechouart up Rue des Martyrs to Rue Antoinette was something of a trek. And if that was not enough, the concierge at Number 40 pointed them up another four flights of stairs to Sieurac's attic studio.

They paused at the door to catch their breath. It was made of rough, bare planks and had neither handle nor knob. It could only be padlocked shut from the outside with a hasp, which hung empty.

Aichele rapped on the wood several times. The door moved a few inches, and an ominous stillness seeped out the opening. Aichele instinctively gave the door a crisp push. It swung open with a dry creak.

The scene was one of chaos and clutter, and horror.

"My God," Mrs. Poll whispered.

The studio was large, probably thirty feet on a side. But the room itself seemed smaller because of its steeply sloped ceiling, which was the building's roofline as well. It slanted downward from the top of the one full wall to a point only a foot or two above the floor on the opposite wall. Three small windows were cut into it and were the only source of natural light. They leaked when it rained, as shown by the long, moldy streaks on the plaster, running down from their corners.

There were half a dozen pieces of furniture altogether. A black drawing room table, its finish long since scraped and

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chipped beyond repair, lay on its side under the windows. Another table, made of the same rough planks as the door, had been thrust against the low end of the sloped ceiling with such force that one corner was embedded in the plaster. There was a tattered sofa near the door, and three bentwood chairs, all knocked over, were scattered along the length of the room.

Splatters of paint, with shards of glass embedded in them, were everywhere, along with dirty brushes and palettes and hundreds of rough sketches on scraps of paper of every conceivable size and shape. Two easels stood in front of the high wall. One was empty and one held a finished painting. In front of the painting, hanging by the neck from a black, grimy rope, was the body of Marcel Sieurac.

It seemed like a trick, conjured by some macabre magician. The corpse clearly possessed great weight, yet it dangled in the air, two feet above the floor. The black rope looked more like a thread, making a sharp line up to one of the exposed beams that linked the upper part of the high wall to the sloped ceiling. Thence it descended, at an angle, to the steampipe near the floor.

Mrs. Poll stood without moving, consumed by the sight. It was no less gruesome for Aichele, but his experience as a detective had taught him to regard even the most unnerving sight as a simple collection of pieces, to be taken apart and scrutinized and then, he hoped, to be understood.

He circled the body, tilting his head back to look at it, as one would do upon approaching a very tall person. He followed the course of the rope, up to the beam, and down again. He reached out and plucked the length leading to the steampipe, producing a dull thump that startled Mrs. Poll and leaving a smudge on his fingers.

He took hold of Sieurac's wrists, first one and then the other. He turned the hands outward. They were deeply stained with many years' accumulation of oils and turpentine; some grime was also smeared across the palms.

When Aichele released the wrists, the body rotated slightly, as if stirred by a faint breeze. It was then that he saw the bloodstain on Sieurac's shoulder. Its source was a dried trickle emerging from the ragged, graying head of hair.

One of the bentwood chairs was on the floor nearby. Aichele righted it and stood on

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the seat. Straining on his tiptoes, he could see a short, deep cut in Sieurac's scalp. Alongside it was a bruised, swollen lump.

He stepped down from the chair, and he and Mrs. Poll both immediately noticed the same thing. Aichele pushed the chair beneath the body. Even though Sieurac's toes pointed down, they were suspended a good six inches above its seat.

There was a sudden, disgusted cry from behind them. It was the concierge, his eyes wide and riveted on the body.

He came closer, peered into Sieurac's face, and turned away with a grimace. "Is he dead?"

"I am afraid so," Aichele answered.

The concierge's eyes darted around the room, finally settling on the painting behind the body. He went quickly to it, and began unfastening it from the easel. He accidently brushed his sleeve against the canvas.

"Blast," he muttered. The paint was still wet. He picked up a rag from the floor and did his best to wipe the smudge from his cuff.

"You should leave things as they are," Aichele said. "For the police."

"But he owes two months' rent. How much of that am I going to collect from his corpse?"

"Just the same, it would be better if you left everything alone."

"Who are you to say? And just what are the two of you doing here, anyway?"

"We were here on business."

"What kind of business? Buying a painting? I suppose you're going to tell me you've already bought and paid for this one. You've got another think coming, monsieur." The concierge returned to the painting and finished detaching it from the easel.

Aichele did not exactly stop him from taking the painting, but he stood just enough in the concierge's way so that in order to get by he would have scraped most of the painting off against Aichele's jacket.

"I'm not interested in the painting," Aichele said. "You can have it. But I am interested in what has happened here."

The concierge suspended his exit.

"The studio is in shambles," Aichele said.

"Not surprising," the concierge answered. "There was quite a row up here, an hour or so ago."

"Did you see who it was?"

"Of course. It's my job to keep an eye on things. M. St. Cloud was here. He's Sieurac's dealer,

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or business agent or something. They had a disagreement, I think it's safe to say."

"About what?"

"How should I know? I was downstairs. All I heard was shouting and thumping and crashing. It went on for several minutes, and I was about to come up and put a stop to it. But things quieted down, and right afterwards M. St. Cloud left."

"Did you ask him what happened?"

"No. It was none of my business, once it was over. But an odd thing—in spite of all the racket, M. St. Cloud looked very cool and collected, in fact a little bit pleased with himself. There wasn't a hair on his head out of place. So whatever happened, it had nothing to do with him. Now, monsieur, I would like to take my painting, and there is the unpleasant necessity of notifying the police."

"Of course," Aichele answered, stepping out of the way.

"What did happen here, Aichele?" Mrs. Poll asked once they were alone.

Aichele answered, but he was absorbed in his own thoughts. "Sieurac was indeed a creative person. Very creative, and unbelievably desperate."

This cryptic response was not satisfactory, but before Mrs. Poll could say anything more, Aichele's attention was drawn to a piece of paper lying on the floor. There was a list on it, in three columns.

"Look at this," he said. "It is the list of buyers Mme. Sieurac had asked for, along with the paintings they bought and their prices. I wonder if St. Cloud brought it with him today?"

"No," Mrs. Poll said, bending down and pulling an envelope from the clutter nearby. "Here is an envelope from Galerie Lefèvre, probably the one the list came in. It was posted on Friday, and would have arrived here Saturday."

"So Sierac had a chance to read it and to stew about it. The list is a distinguished one, to judge from some of these titles. People like this can certainly afford more than rock-bottom prices for their art. For example, the Baron de St. Eugène paid only ninety francs for *View of Pont Neuf.*"

"Who?" Mrs. Poll asked, coming to Aichele and looking at the list over his shoulder. The baron's name, along with two others immediately below, had been underlined with thick, angry strokes of black crayon. She was about to say some-

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thing when Aichele interrupted.

"M. St. Cloud was practically giving Sieurac's work away to these people. And I think if we can find out why, we can make some sense of what we have witnessed here. But there is not much time."

Aichele let the list drop and hurried Mrs. Poll out the door.

There were no taxis on Rue Antoinette, and even though they hastened, it took Aichele and Mrs. Poll a good twenty minutes to reach Galerie Lefèvre.

M. St. Cloud was at a desk in the back. If it hadn't been for the smell of his pipe, they would never have known he was there. He did not glance up until they were in front of the desk.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

"I was here last week," Aichele said, "inquiring about a painting."

"I remember. And madame was at the opening."

"I have a story to tell you," Aichele said, barely concealing his haste.

M. St. Cloud put on a falsely curious expression. "You do?"

"I was at a dinner party at Château Lepaulle over the weekend. The company was exclusive, as you can imagine. Among the guests was a good friend of mine and a customer of yours, the Baron de St. Eugène."

Aichele had hoped his story would produce a reaction, but he was frankly stunned as M. St. Cloud's mouth dropped open, and his face went completely pale.

"As you know," Aichele continued, pretending not to notice the response, "the baron purchased *View of Pont Neuf,* the very same painting I wanted, for a mere ninety francs. He took no small pleasure in pointing this fact out to me, and that he considered it an amazing bargain. And if that were not enough, none other than Mme. Charles Beauchamp was in attendance at the very same dinner. You certainly know her, as well, since she bought *Hotel de Ville at Dusk* for an equally trifling sum."

M. St. Cloud got up from his desk and stood facing Aichele, his arms folded and a scowl spreading across his face. Mrs. Poll, meanwhile, simply stared at Aichele in undisguised astonishment.

"I have two questions, monsieur," Aichele went on, smiling broadly at M. St. Cloud. "First, please explain why two very rich individuals, both astute investors, have bought from you the work of a singu-

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larly unknown and undistinguished artist. Second, presuming there is method to this madness, how do I share in the adventure?"

M. St. Cloud bit grimly on his lower lip. Finally he said, "There is one painting left. I will sell it to you for five hundred francs."

"Five hundred francs? After the baron paid only ninety for his?"

"Four hundred fifty."

"Four hundred. Not a franc more. Plus I want a full explanation of just how my four hundred francs will grow, and how much it will grow into."

"Agreed. A full answer to your question is, of course, impossible; however, I can . . . "

The front doors of the gallery flew open, and a squad of gendarmes rushed in, hurrying the length of the room toward M. St. Cloud. Even before he turned to look, Aichele knew what was happening, and he threw up his arms in frustration.

"You are M. St. Cloud?" demanded the leader of the squad, none other than Inspector Leroux, an ex-colleague of Aichele's.

"I am."

"You are under arrest for the murder of Marcel Sieurac. Take him away."

Leroux did recognize Aichele and Mrs. Poll, although he was not yet aware of the true depth of the coincidence.

"I did not expect you so soon, Leroux," Aichele said. "In fact, it was not you I expected at all. Since when do inspectors from the Préfecture investigate hangings in Montmartre?"

Leroux had learned never to be surprised at anything Aichele said or did. "I was in the Eighteenth on other business," he answered, curtly.

"And that's a lucky thing. Not many detectives would have come so quickly to the conclusion you have obviously reached concerning M. St. Cloud."

"So it was the two of you who found the body. The concierge told me a man and woman had been there. You were obliged to remain at the scene, Aichele. You know that."

"But, inspector, there was nothing we could do for M. Sieurac. And there was nothing I saw that would not be obvious to any competent detective. The chair was impossibly low for a suicide, the victim had suffered a blow to the head, and there was a violent argument between Sieurac and M. St. Cloud at about the time of the artist's death. So you concluded M. St. Cloud murdered Sieurac. He knocked him unconscious

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and then hung the body by the neck in an inept attempt to disguise the whole thing as a suicide."

Leroux had nothing to say. His men were waiting for him. "I will expect the two of you in my office to make a statement." Then he added, suggesting he did not care if Aichele or Mrs. Poll ever came to his office, "At your leisure, of course."

Outside, on Boulevard de Rochechouart, Aichele and Mrs. Poll watched as the last gendarme locked the gallery doors.

"Well," Aichele said, "it seems like Mme. Sieurac's suspicions were correct, and if it were not for Leroux's impeccably bad timing, M. St. Cloud would have given us at least the beginning of an explanation. We do have the list of buyers, though, or at least whatever names on it we can think of. I remember the three who were underlined. Do you recall any of the others?"

"You intend to question them?"

"Absolutely. Greedy people are easily tricked, and I am sure that between the two of us we can devise a scenario in which they will speak freely."

"I doubt that."

"Oh?" Aichele was questioning the inexplicable smile on Mrs. Poll's face, along with what she said.

"What we really ought to do is discuss the whole thing with M. St. Cloud's accomplice," she said.

"His accomplice? What makes you think he has an accomplice?"

"M. Aichele, when I stood there gawking at poor M. Sieurac, you felt no need to explain to me how you knew the police would go straight to M. St. Cloud and arrest him for murder. I, likewise, do not feel obliged to explain what I know to you."

"Yes, but . . . "

"What is good enough for the goose is good enough for the gander."

"All right. But goose or gander, the idea is to not be roasted and eaten."

"No promises, monsieur."

An hour later, and after Mrs. Poll stopped to inquire at a neighborhood bakery, she and Aichele stood at the door of an apartment on Rue Poultier, on the Ile St. Louis. It was an ordinary looking building on the outside, but the interior was ornate and luxurious.

Their knock was answered by M. Boucherot, who needed no introduction since Aichele recognized him from the opening.

"Good afternoon," he said in a charming voice. He wore a

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black silk smoking jacket and was clearly flattered rather than annoyed at having strangers at his door. But he made no move to invite them in.

"Good afternoon, monsieur," Mrs. Poll answered.

"And what may I do for you?"

"Marcel Sieurac is dead," Mrs. Poll said.

"I know." M. Boucherot was nothing if not an astute observer, and he recognized Mrs. Poll's opening gambit as exactly that.

"They arrested M. St. Cloud and charged him with Sieurac's murder," she continued.

"I know that, too. The poor fellow sent me a rather desperate message from the Concergerie. Killing Sieurac was hardly necessary, but what's done is done, *n'est-ce pas?* Are the two of you newspaper reporters?"

"No, monsieur," Mrs. Poll said. Aichele stood silently as they had agreed he would do.

"Then who are you, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"I am Mrs. Poll. This is Paul Aichele. We know that you and M. St. Cloud were swindling Sieurac."

Boucherot smiled. "St. Cloud was swindling Sieurac, not I."

"There is irrefutable evidence that you were involved."

"Oh, of course. Only the police don't have it, you and your companion here do. But you would be willing to turn it all over to me for a price, correct? Well, madame, I compliment you on your resourcefulness and your quickness. I doubt that Sieurac's body has even cooled yet. But I am not interested in being blackmailed today, perhaps some other time. Now, if you will please excuse me, I have better things to do than stand here and chat."

"We do have the evidence, monsieur." Mrs. Poll's icy seriousness kept M. Boucherot from closing the door. He waited to hear more.

"And it might, indeed, remain confidential."

M. Boucherot chuckled with satisfaction. "All right, madame, tell me what your evidence is, and I will tell you what an avaricious fool you are, and we will be done with it."

"You and M. St. Cloud have surreptitiously acquired a sizable collection of Marcel Sieurac's work, at extraordinarily low prices. Your object is to sell them at extraordinarily high prices. Of course, there is presently no demand for these paintings, but luckily you are one of the most influential art critics in Paris, and in that capacity you can 'discover' Marcel Sieurac. With the proper timing, and perhaps with some as-

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sistance from others in the art world who might owe you a favor or two, a flurry of interest in Sieurac's work can be stirred up. It will not last long, since the most effusive public praise cannot sustain mediocre work by itself. But before the bubble bursts, you will have sold your hoard of paintings at a tidy profit."

"Very good, madame. I will keep your fantasy in mind for my next fiction. You left out the most important thing, though. You see, M. Sieurac's unhappy death will increase the value of his work tremendously. M. St. Cloud knew this, and it would be a motive for murder, if you ask me. Too bad he was so stupid as to get caught. Oh yes, another thing you neglected. You said you had proof that I was involved."

"There is a list of buyers in Sieurac's studio, given to him by M. St. Cloud. It is a list Sieurac demanded because he suspected the very swindle you and M. St. Cloud were perpetrating. The list consists of fictitious names, and you helped compose it."

The mention of the list did produce a trace of concern on M. Boucherot's otherwise placid expression. But it evaporated instantly.

"Three of the names, 'Baron de St. Eugène,' 'Mme. Charles Beauchamp,' and 'Mme. Pinet,' are characters from a weekly serial in *La Gazette de France,* authored by yourself under a nom de plume."

" 'Antonin,' my dear," M. Boucherot contributed.

Aichele was silently mortified, and at the same time understood both M. St. Cloud's reaction to his story of the dinner party and Mrs. Poll's later smile.

"Mrs. Poll," Boucherot said, "you are indeed wasting our time. I am pleased M. St. Cloud chose three of my characters to include on his list. The publicity will do wonders. But it has nothing to do with me. It shows the popularity of my writing, not my complicity."

"Except for one crucial point. Is it not true that 'Mme. Charles Beauchamp' is the suddenly widowed cousin of 'Baron de St. Eugène?' "

"Excellent. You too are a reader."

"She first appeared in yesterday's episode. Before then, in fact, we readers did not even know the baron had a cousin."

"Right you are."

"But the list was mailed on Friday of last week, when 'Mme. Charles Beauchamp' existed only in your imagination and in your manuscript, which was by then at the offices of *La Gazette* and under guard, we

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curious readers are constantly assured. You helped St. Cloud compose a list of fictitious buyers, and you could not resist this touch of conceit, and because of it we have found you out."

Boucherot's aplomb did not desert him completely, but it was obvious he was thinking hard, and without success.

"Monsieur," Aichele said, finally breaking his silence. "Your accomplice stands accused of a murder. There is strong circumstantial evidence against him, and you yourself have suggested a motive. However, I have evidence that will clear him. I will share it with the police if you agree to a certain course of action, which I will explain in due time. If not, I will let justice run its course, but I warn you, if I were in M. St. Cloud's position, I would not go to the guillotine alone."

"Would you like a drink?" M. Boucherot suddenly said, opening the door wide.

Aichele and Mrs. Poll had been waiting only a few minutes at Sieurac's studio when Inspector Leroux arrived in response to their invitation. The day was almost done, but there was still enough light for their purposes.

The room was under guard, and nothing had changed since that morning, except the rope now dangled empty from the beam.

"I am glad you found time to come, Leroux," Aichele said. "And as I told you in Galerie Lefèvre, it is fortunate that a detective of your caliber was first upon the scene. None of the things I will point out escaped your notice, I'm sure, but I have cogitated upon them all day, and they do now finally suggest a different picture."

Aichele untied the rope from the steampipe and let it fall. Then he gathered it up in his hands.

"Your conclusion that Sieurac's death was a murder clumsily disguised as a suicide is wrong, Leroux. It is in fact just the opposite. Marcel Sieurac did commit suicide. By sheer coincidence—or so you must assume, since you have no evidence to the contrary—his death looked like a murder. Allow me to demonstrate."

Aichele pulled the rope through his hands, examining it as he did so until he came to two distinct creases a few inches apart.

"These creases were made by the sharp corners of the beam where the rope passed over it while it suspended a heavy but stationary weight."

He then threw the rope back over the beam, but with the fa-

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tal loop toward the steampipe, and the creases just beyond the beam.

"Now, Leroux, take hold of that end of the rope, and I will grasp this end. Then pull me up, as you theorize M. St. Cloud must have done to raise Sieurac's unconscious body."

Leroux hesitated for a moment, squeamish about holding the loop. But then he hauled away. Aichele hung by his hands from the other end of the rope. It was by no means easy to lift him off the floor, but Leroux finally accomplished the task. When Aichele was more or less at the height Sieurac's body had been, he released his grip and dropped to the floor.

"Let's look at the rope," he said.

The difference was immediately obvious. The section of rope which had been pulled over the sharp corners of the beam was scraped almost completely bare of grime.

"Sieurac did hang with this rope," Aichele said. "But he did it himself. No one pulled him up."

"But the chair," Leroux said, in something of a weak counterattack.

"The chair was too low for him to stand on, and place the loop around his neck. But he could reach the loop, then pull himself up high enough to thrust his head through it. That is why his hands were so grimy, just as ours are now."

Leroux did not have to look at his hands to appreciate this point. "What about the lump on his head? The cut? And the argument with M. St. Cloud?"

Aichele pointed to a shattered absinthe bottle lying at the base of the radiator. "The wounds could have been self-inflicted for all we know. Whatever pain Sieurac felt this morning was not physical pain. As for the argument, well, men do argue occasionally. I am sure M. St. Cloud offered an explanation, and there is no reason it cannot be accepted at face value."

Leroux's teeth were tightly clenched. He looked about for a rag, found one, and wiped his hands on it.

"This is only my interpretation, Leroux. Perhaps there is other, more compelling evidence against M. St. Cloud that I am not aware of."

"There is no other evidence," Leroux muttered, his eyes on the coil of rope on the floor. "Nor was there even a crime."

View of Pont Neuf was delivered to Aichele's flat two months later. He accepted the painting from Mme. Sieurac in lieu of cash payment for his services. Boucherot and M. St.

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Cloud had graciously sold back to her, on credit, their collection of her husband's work, for exactly the prices on their list. The paintings were then assembled into a posthumous exhibit, which became an extraordinary critical and financial success. This was due in no small part to an unprecedented barrage of glowing pre-exhibit publicity, spearheaded by M. Boucherot and *Le Figaro*. He wrote, among other things, how it sometimes takes the tragedy of a man's death for the world to appreciate his life's work.

Aichele had compiled a small scrapbook of these articles. Also included, in the author's inimitable, flowery prose, was a complete and signed account of the proposed swindle of Marcel Sieurac.

Since it was Monday, Aichele waited until Mrs. Poll arrived to hang the painting. It was in the study, along with two glasses of red wine.

"You are to be congratulated, Aichele," she said. "You have made Marcel Sieurac famous. Boucherot more than fulfilled my expectations."

"Mine, too. Remind me to return his confession some day. After all, I did promise. But I am afraid his anxiety cannot compare with what Marcel Sieurac must have felt when he realized the significance of those three names."

"That Sunday, when he read the *Gazette?*" Mrs. Poll said.

"Quite possibly. But whenever it was, he knew he had been swindled, just as you surmised. And there was nothing he could do about it. He had already accepted payment for the paintings. If he complained, M. St. Cloud and Boucherot could have simply locked them away forever—their investment was that small. And the only other choice was to watch others enrich themselves speculating on what he had given away so cheaply."

"He could have painted more paintings."

"No, and that must have been what drove him to such desperate ends. As you said, the bubble would burst, most likely sooner than later. The art buyers would not just ignore Marcel Sieurac, they would revile him."

"So he created his own murder, knowing M. St. Cloud, and maybe even Boucherot, would be accused. But what a terrible price to pay for revenge."

"But what exquisite revenge."

Aichele held *View of Pont Neuf* up against a bare spot on the wall. "What do you think? How does our painting look here?" he asked.

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"Our painting?"

"Of course. It is half yours."

Aichele moved it to another spot.

"When I want to look at the Pont Neuf, I will walk down the street and look at it."

"But you would not see this," Aichele cautioned.

"Goodness, no," Mrs. Poll agreed.

"You would be on the wrong side of the river. The *View* is from the Louvre." Aichele held the painting, waiting for Mrs. Poll's comment. Finally he looked back over his shoulder. The room was empty, but there was the swish of a feather duster coming from the hallway.

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Find Me

by Jeffrey Bush

The phone rang. Kelly picked it up.

"Teen Lifeline," she said. "Can I help you?"

Silence.

"Can I help you?" she said again.

More silence.

"I'm Kelly," she said. "What's your name?"

She waited.

There was a procedure for silent callers—you gave them as much time as they needed. Maybe they were deciding if they liked your voice. Maybe it had taken so much nerve for them to call that they didn't know what to say.

"Is there something you want to talk about?"

There was another possibility.

Kelly didn't like to think about it. But she had to.

Maybe they *couldn't* say anything.

"Are you all right?"

Maybe they'd done something. Like cut themselves. Or taken an overdose.

"If you can't say anything, can you make a noise?"

She listened.

"Can you tap the telephone?"

There was no sound.

Or was there?

Had she heard, in the background, the sound of something? Something ordinary—like a car—but not exactly a car—passing by?

Whatever it had been, the sound was gone now.

"I have to hang up," she said. "But you can call back any time."

She made her voice as friendly as she could.

Sometimes people called because they didn't have any other friends. Because they were lonely.

And that was reason enough.

"Teen Lifeline is open until nine tonight. And there's always the regular Lifeline. The regular Lifeline is open twenty-four hours a day, and they'll be glad to take your call."

She waited.

She let what she thought was enough time go by. Then, to make sure, she waited a little more.

Just as she was about to hang up, the line went dead.

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Which was a relief. She didn't like to hang up on a caller.

She liked to think that she'd done everything she could.

And she had, hadn't she?

Of course she had.

She worried too much.

At the phone in the next cubicle, Marianne was murmuring, "Yes" and "Uh-uh."

Marianne was on the regular Lifeline. Marianne was nice. She was about forty and slight, with a soft, comforting voice.

Kelly was glad to be on the same shift with Marianne. Sometimes, between calls, they had a chance to chat a little.

Kelly's math book was lying open. She picked it up.

The Teen Lifeline didn't get as many calls as the regular Lifeline. Usually she had time to do some homework.

But almost at once her phone rang.

"Teen Lifeline," she said. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so."

It was a male voice. A young male voice, sort of husky.

"What's the trouble?" Kelly said.

"Well, I have this problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"A personal problem."

Kelly had only been a Teen Lifeliner for a month and a half. But there were some calls that she had learned to be suspicious of.

This was one of them.

"Oh?"

"It's hard to tell you about it."

"Why is it hard to tell me about it?"

"Because you're a girl."

She was definitely suspicious.

"Would you rather talk to a boy?"

"Oh no."

"There's a boy on in two hours, at six."

"I'd rather talk to you."

He was breathing fast. And Kelly was afraid she knew why.

But maybe she was wrong.

"What would you like to talk about?"

"I'd like to talk about you."

"We don't talk about ourselves."

"I just want to ask you one thing."

"We're here to talk about you."

"What kind of underwear are you wearing?"

Damn.

Why did boys have to be like that?

"I'm sorry," she said. "We don't accept that sort of call."

"I just—"

She hung up firmly.

Marianne, still on the phone, had heard her. Marianne gave her a wry, sympathetic smile.

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Kelly took a deep breath.

Boys were so *stupid.*

She picked up her math book.

"Are you okay?"

It was Marianne, looking at her. Marianne's call was finished, too.

"Oh, sure."

Kelly waved a hand. Although she'd been too upset by that call, to tell the truth, to think about her math.

More upset than she needed to be.

Why did she take everything so hard?

"Sex callers are a nuisance," Marianne said.

"They told us about them in training class. But I didn't realize there'd be so many of them."

"I suppose they're lonely, too."

Kelly didn't want to go on about it. She wanted to know more about Marianne.

They hadn't had a real conversation yet, in spite of their month and a half of sitting side by side.

She had a feeling she would like Marianne.

"How long have you been a Lifeliner?" she asked.

"Let's see." Marianne pondered. "This is my fifth year."

"Wow."

Marianne looked amused. "I like it."

"I guess you do."

"I wouldn't keep on if I didn't."

"I like it, too." Kelly hesitated. "But I'm not sure I like it *that* much."

"Most volunteers just stay a year."

"Yes."

"That's what they promise."

"I know."

"Some don't last that long."

"They don't?"

"It can be difficult."

"Yes."

"What brought you here?"

Did Kelly mind that question?

No, she told herself.

Marianne wasn't being nosy. It was she, Kelly, who was making too much of a polite inquiry.

The way she made too much of everything.

"I—"

She stopped.

She'd told about it at her first interview. Why not tell Marianne about it?

Why not get used to telling about it?

She cleared her throat.

It wasn't something to be ashamed of.

"My sister—"

She hoped a phone wasn't going to ring. She couldn't bear it if a phone rang now.

"My sister Megan committed suicide. Two years ago."

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There was a pause. Not a painful pause. Just a pause.

"A lot of us are here because of something like that," Marianne said.

Kelly relaxed a little.

"I have a nephew who killed himself," Marianne went on quietly.

And that was all.

Which was part of what was so nice, Kelly thought, about Marianne. And the other Lifeliners she'd met. They just shared what needed to be shared, matter-of-factly, and left it at that. They didn't jump in with something awkward. They didn't make a fuss, like—

Like her family.

Her family were one reason she was here.

It wasn't that her family didn't try to understand her.

Her family had tried so hard to understand her, and what she was feeling, that somehow she couldn't let them know.

Maybe here, at the Lifeliners, she could begin to sort things out.

Before she could say so, Marianne's phone rang. A moment later Kelly's did, too.

"Teen Lifeline," she said. "Can I help you?"

At first there was nothing. Then there was the sound of a drawn breath.

"Hi."

It was a male voice. A young, toneless, male voice. That was all she could tell about it.

"Hi."

"I called before."

"You did?"

"I didn't say anything."

So this was her silent caller.

"I'm glad you called back."

He didn't answer.

"What's the trouble?" she asked.

"I'm not sure why I called."

"You're not?"

"You can't do anything."

"I can't?"

"It's too late."

She gripped the phone tighter.

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody can do anything."

His voice was fading.

"I can't hear you."

"I said, it's too late."

His voice was louder. And there was a touch of irritation in it.

Her heart was thumping.

"Do you mean you've taken something?"

Silence.

"Yes," he said.

Oh Lord.

"You've taken some pills?"

"Yes."

She'd never had a call like this.

If she let herself, she would panic. She couldn't let herself.

What to do first?

Get Marianne's help.

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She turned in her chair. Talking so Marianne could hear, she said, "What kind of pills have you taken?"

"Valium."

"How many Valium?"

"I don't know."

Thank goodness, Marianne had heard. Marianne went on listening to her call, but her gaze was on Kelly.

"A dozen?"

"All that were in the bottle."

"More than a dozen?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Kelly saw that Marianne was hanging up. She must have explained to her caller that there was a medical emergency. Now she would put the other lines on hold.

"What difference does it make?" he said.

"I want to help you."

"You can't help me."

Marianne had pulled her chair closer. She was writing something on a pad of paper. Her handwriting was so bad that Kelly could hardly make it out.

How long? it seemed to be.

How long what?

She felt the panic rising. She forced it down. She could feel as terrified as she wanted to after this was over.

Now she had to get things right.

She *had* to.

She realized what Marianne was asking.

"How long ago," she said, "did you take the Valium?"

"Half an hour ago."

½ hour, she scrawled on the pad.

Where? Marianne wrote.

"Where are you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Are you at home?"

"It's too late."

Marianne was writing again. *Anyone else?*

"Is anyone else there?"

"No."

Taxi?

"Can you call a taxi?"

"Why?"

"To take you to a hospital."

"I don't want to go to a hospital."

His voice was fading.

"I can't hear you."

"I don't want to go to a hospital," he said loudly.

Groggy?

Was the Valium, Marianne meant, making him groggy?

No.

Kelly shook her head.

He didn't sound groggy. Just distant, sometimes, as if he were letting the phone slip down. As if he didn't care if she heard him or not.

But he'd called.

He'd called twice.

He *did* care. Didn't he?

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing."

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"Something must be bothering you a lot."

No answer.

"Are you in school?"

His silence, Kelly thought, meant that question was too dumb to answer. But it seemed to mean something else, as well.

It meant, *Keep asking.*

"Is it your grades?"

"No."

"Friends?"

"No."

"Girls?"

"Nothing like that."

Before, Kelly had thought she could hear the sound of something, in the background, that was not quite a car. She thought she could hear it now.

It was not quite an airplane, either.

What was it?

"You don't care," he said.

"I do care."

"You don't know me."

"I know what it's like to feel bad."

"No, you don't."

Yes, I do, she wanted to say. *I really do.* But it wouldn't do any good to argue.

What would do some good?

"You know my name," she said. "It's Kelly. What's yours?"

"Why do you want to know?"

His voice had changed.

"I want to know more about you," she said.

"Are you tracing this call?"

"We don't do things like that."

"How do I know?"

"This call is just between you and us."

"Us?"

"Yes."

"Who's us?"

She bit her lip.

Had she made a mistake?

"Someone's helping me. Her name is Marianne."

"I thought it was just you and me."

"Marianne's nice. She wants to help you. She's—an older person."

Marianne smiled slightly.

"So it's you and me and Marianne."

"Yes."

"An older person."

"Yes."

"Like my mother."

Why had he said that?

"Your mother?"

"My mother's an older person."

"Is your mother the trouble?"

He laughed, sort of.

"I took my mother's Valium."

"You did?"

"She'll be sorry, when she finds out."

"She will?"

"That'll make her sit up."

"Sit up?"

"And pay attention."

"She doesn't pay attention to you?"

There was a pause.

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"Oh, stuff it," he said abruptly. "I've had enough pop psychology."

"Are you in therapy?"

"Of course I'm in therapy."

"Of course?"

"Isn't everybody?"

"Is it helping?"

There was that laugh again. If that's what it was.

"Oh, sure. It's been a wonderful success. That's why I've taken my mother's Valium. That's why I'm calling you."

"Who's your therapist?"

"Oh no. You won't trick me that way."

"I don't want to trick you."

But she had. She had wondered if his therapist could tell her where he was.

Though they couldn't call his therapist. Not unless he said they could.

Could she guess where he was? From the sound she'd heard? That was not quite a car or an airplane?

No. It wasn't enough.

"I want to help you," she said.

He was silent.

"Tell me where you are."

"Find me," he said.

"What?"

"If you want to help, find me."

It was so frustrating. Nothing she said seemed to be any use.

"How can I find you? If you won't let me?"

"You don't want to find me. You just want to go back to your normal, happy life."

She felt a flash of irritation of her own.

My life's not so normal. Or so happy. Not since—

"If you don't want to tell me where you are, tell me what's troubling you."

"I told you. It's nothing."

She was trying to help, wasn't she? What gave him the right to be so impossible?

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"I don't *know.*"

"You don't know what's troubling you?"

"It's nothing. Nothing and everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean everything's wonderful. I have a wonderful mother. I have a wonderful therapist. I have a wonderful father, when I see him, and a wonderful house. I go to a wonderful school. I have a wonderful everything, and *I can't stand it.*"

Was he crying?

Had she got through to him? At last? Just when she'd given up?

Were things going to turn out right?

This time, were things going to turn out right?

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"I'm glad you told me that."

Her hand was clenched around the phone.

"But it's not a reason to do something to yourself."

She concentrated all her strength.

"Nothing is."

She made herself speak slowly. Slowly and carefully.

"Now, I want you to tell me where you are. So we can send an ambulance for you."

There was a long pause.

"No."

His voice was very faint.

"I want—" she began.

"I'm going down to the beach."

"I can hardly hear you."

"Then I'm going to walk into the water."

"Into the water?"

"Into the sunset."

"I don't want you to do that."

"That's too bad."

"I don't want—"

"It doesn't matter what you don't want."

His voice was getting fainter.

"Which beach?" she said desperately.

There were beaches all along this part of the coast. Mile after mile of sand and Atlantic Ocean.

"Never mind."

"I want—"

There was a click.

She pressed the phone against her ear, trying to hear something.

Nothing.

There was a hand on her arm. Marianne's.

"He hung up?"

She banged down the phone. "Damn," she said. *"Damn, damn, damn."*

"You did everything you could."

"He's going to walk into the water. Into the sunset."

"You did—"

She pounded on the table with her fist.

"I did everything I could, and it didn't work."

"No."

"It didn't work."

"Sometimes it doesn't."

Marianne was standing beside her. She buried her face in Marianne's dress.

"It never works." She scarcely knew what she was saying. Words were pouring out of her, furiously. *"They just go and kill themselves."*

"Some of them do."

"I hate them. I hate them. I hate them."

"Them?"

"All of them."

"You're really angry at her, aren't you?"

She raised her head.

"What?"

"At your sister Megan."

Something inside her gave way.

Tears filled her eyes.

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Yes. I am. I'm really mad at her.

She shivered. She wiped her eyes. She took a long, snuffling breath.

This was something to think about, later, when she got home.

About getting really mad at someone. And forgiving her.

"Wait," she said suddenly.

"What is it?"

" 'Into the sunset.' "

"Into the sunset?"

"That's what he said he was going to do. 'Walk into the water. Into the sunset.' "

"Maybe," Marianne began soothingly, "he won't really—"

"But how can he do that?"

"How?"

"He left me a clue."

"A clue?"

"I don't think he meant to, but he told me where he is."

"He did?"

"He *did* want me to help him."

"Yes?"

"The sun sets in the west."

"Yes."

"Our beaches don't face west. Not our ocean beaches. They face the Atlantic."

"But—"

"It's got to be a beach on a lake! And that was the noise I heard!"

"What noise?"

"I heard something go by, and I didn't know what it was. But now I do. It was a motorboat!"

"Well—"

"And there's only one lake around here that's big enough to have motorboats! And a beach! Crystal Lake!"

They looked at each other.

"You may be right," Marianne said.

"We can send an ambulance!"

"Did he give us permission?"

"He said, *Find me!*"

Marianne sat down. She picked up her phone.

"First I have to call our Home Director and get an okay."

Kelly sat back, exhausted.

She'd done everything she could.

She knew she had.

And maybe, she thought, that was enough.

She opened her eyes.

"Do you think there's a chance?"

Marianne was dialing.

"Yes. I think there is."

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Criminal Justice

by Albert Bashover

A bland, almost featureless seven story office building sits on the bank of the river Seine in Saint-Cloud, near Paris. Most people would not take special note of it unless they walked into the marble entranceway and noticed the relief on the wall. It depicts a globe of the world overlying the scales of justice; the globe is pierced vertically by a sword. At the bottom is the word INTERPOL. Above, on the left, are the initials O.I.P.C., and on the right I.C.P.O., which are the French and English initials for International Crime Police Organization. This unimpressive building at 26 rue Armengaud contains the offices of Interpol's general secretariat and is Interpol's main office. The quietness of the halls belies the fact that it is chronically understaffed. . . .

It seemed that everyone, from the top down, was constantly being asked to do double duty. Because of this, Maxim Nevsky was not particularly hopeful when Pierre Fernet, the new head of the narcotics division, sent for him. Maxim, who had a desk job in the documents section of narcotics, had requested field duty from Monsieur Frenetti, his immediate superior, many times but was always told that his work in document translation was much too important for him to be released for field work, especially when skilled Rumanian-Russian-English translators were so hard to come by. Maxim was not in a position to argue. With his background, he was surprised that Interpol had hired him at all, but he knew that the real reason for the refusal to make him a field agent was his age. Sixty was not so old, Maxim thought. He had kept himself in good physical condition, the result of his career in the KGB. He knew he looked years younger. Although his hair was white, it was still thick. His face was thin but unlined, and he carried his still muscular six foot height erectly. But Frenetti had his dossier, which clearly stated his age, and there was no way to get around that.

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Pierre Fernet's secretary told Maxim that he was expected, but he hesitated for a second in front of Fernet's closed office door, checking for the presence of the notebook in his hand and the sharpened pencil and ballpoint pen in his pocket. After all, the chances were that he was just being called for a simple translation job. He tapped lightly.

"Come in, Monsieur Nevsky."

The first thing Maxim noticed as he entered was that Fernet had a guest. A small female figure with carefully combed blondish hair and a light blue cotton dress was seated before his desk, her back to Maxim.

Fernet pushed his pudgy frame off his office chair and stood up to his full, rotund, five foot three. His gravelly voice seemed incongruous with his stature. "Monsieur Nevsky, I would like to introduce you to Madame Shannon," he said.

The lady turned, offering Maxim her hand. "How do you do, Monsieur Nevsky." Her French had a touch of the English public school in it. She was older than Maxim had expected from his rear view and appeared to be a well-cared-for lady in her early fifties with a bit of gray mixed in the honey yellow of her hair. Her face was smooth, but there was a sadness about her eyes that might have added a few years to Maxim's assessment of her age.

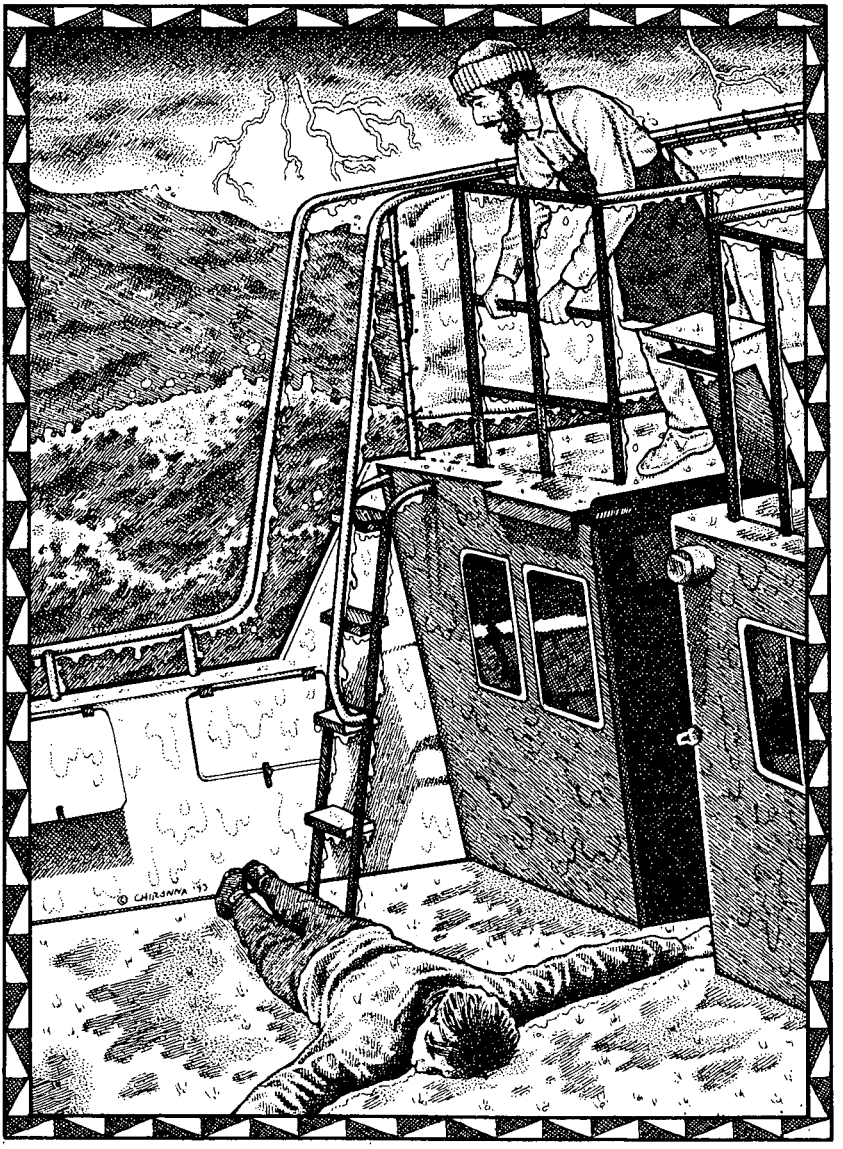
"We haven't met before, Monsieur Nevsky," Pierre Fernet said, "but Monsieur Frenetti has recommended you for a special job. It will require your knowledge of English, Rumanian, and Russian, but I must admit I'm not quite sure you would be, ah, comfortable in this assignment."

Maxim felt a small wave of excitement rising. Perhaps at last he might be getting away from his desk job.

"I am sure I can handle any assignment you might give me," he said. "As my dossier indicates, I've had quite a bit of experience as an investigative agent. As far as my age is concerned—"

"In this case, your age and appearance are an advantage. The problem is that the assignment I have in mind will take the agent into the old U.S.S.R. We know, of course, that you left there illegally several years ago, but since Interpol is an independent organization, not bound by any one nation's laws, we felt there would be no problem in our using your particular linguistic abilities here in France—especially since the U.S.S.R. was never a member of Interpol and you had applied

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"THE SEAS HAD BEEN ROUGH, AND THE STEPS AND THE RAILING WERE WET AND SLIPPERY."

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for French citizenship. In the old U.S.S.R., however, you would have been considered a defector. There have been many changes there since then, but how would you feel about it if you had to go back?"

"Monsieur Fernet, even though I worked for the KGB in the Odessa region for many years, I was never really at ease in that political environment. As you must know from my dossier, that's why I, shall we say, 'departed' that country. But I always did my job there well, and since I left, I've never used any knowledge I might have against my former homeland. In today's environment, as an agent of Interpol, I don't believe I would have any difficulty in returning."

Fernet studied Maxim for a moment. Then he sat down and said, "All right, Monsieur Nevsky. I'll explain our problem. As you know, the Rumanian and the Ukrainian security police may have their little weaknesses, and they don't particularly like each other, but when it comes to the illegal importation of narcotics, they are very strict and actually cooperate to some extent. A few months ago, even though the Ukrainians are not members of our organization, we were notified by their police that they had arrested several addicts in the port city of Odessa, and that those men had pointed them to one of the biggest sources of drugs in the area. It is the same type of narcotics that the Rumanian police have been reporting in large quantities around their Black Sea ports. The Ukrainian informants have identified a recently privatized clothing manufacturer in Odessa that calls itself Para Clothing as the source of the drugs. The authorities there have purposely refrained from immediately closing in on that factory because they and the Rumanians would like to know how the drugs are being smuggled into the country and who is at the other end of the pipeline. We are not talking here of a kilo or two a week but of large quantities being supplied over a considerable length of time. The Ukrainians know that if they close up their end of the drug route any suppliers outside their country will simply find another receiver. The way the country is today, it would be very easy for them to do so."

"It would seem to me, sir," said Maxim, "that the Ukrainian government should know how and from where Para Clothing receives its imported materials. A surveillance of those routes and sources—"

"Of course," interrupted Fernet. "The obvious steps

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were taken by the Ukrainians and by us. The first thing the Ukrainians did was to have two of their operatives obtain jobs in the receiving department of Para Clothing, where they could thoroughly check all the material brought into the factory. In three months they weren't able to find an ounce of narcotics in any shipment—but the dope was still going out the back door. They were, however, able to get some useful information for us. The Ukrainians determined that almost all the imported material for Para Clothing came from Istanbul—"

"A prime source of narcotics," said Maxim.

"True, but also a prime source of mohair and other fabrics they legitimately export. All of Para Clothing's fabrics come from one distributor in Istanbul, Atlas Ltd. Naturally, we notified the Turkish authorities, and they did very much what the Ukrainians had done. They secretly put operatives to work at that distributor, but again, after several months, no narcotics were discovered leaving the plant."

"So that leaves the transportation between the two," mused Maxim half aloud.

"Correct. The Ukrainians noted that all imported shipments to Para Clothing were made via Crescent Shipping Company, a small British-owned shipping line operating in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Crescent owns five ships, but one, the *Athenia,* seems to have been the carrier most used by Atlas. That ship makes regular freight trips from Istanbul to Odessa, with, not incidentally, a stop at Constanza, Rumania. It also carries a few passengers who want a cheap seven-day Black Sea cruise."

"Do you believe the narcotics could be put into the cargo while it's on the ship?"

"Not easily," frowned Fernet. "The *Athenia* is what is called a 'break bulk' cargo ship. That is, all the material is brought to the ship from the distributor packed in crates, covered and sealed with a heavy tarp, and steel-strapped to wooden pallets. The tines of a forklift truck can slip into the spaces provided by the pallet so the cargo can be moved from warehouse to ship and from ship to destination without ever disturbing the security of the package. Even so, for insurance reasons, all palletized packages are thoroughly inspected for tampering both at the Istanbul docks and at the receiver's docks. Besides that, we have had our own personnel secretly check the loads going to Para

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Clothing, even to the extent of 'accidentally' breaking a load now and then so we could inspect it right down to the last layer of fabric. If pallet loads were being opened and resealed on a regular basis, the dock cargo checkers or our men would have surely discovered it by now. Remember, we are talking about a fairly large quantity of narcotics being consistently delivered for almost a year. It should have been easy for our men to spot any tampering."

"Still, the ship should be observed," said Maxim. "Interpol should be able to put someone on board. That is, if the owners are truly innocent and willing to cooperate." He was aware that Madame Shannon was watching him appraisingly with intent blue eyes.

Fermet rose. "You are quite right, Monsieur Nevsky. We have already taken that step, the ship's owners were only too willing to have their innocence proved. The agent we placed on board was Alex Shannon, the son of Madame Shannon here." Fernet came out from behind his desk and put his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Lila Shannon has been employed at Interpol since she was widowed, almost ten years ago. For over five years she has been an excellent investigative agent for my department. Through her efforts, her son was also hired by Interpol and trained as an agent." The narcotics chief looked at the lady with a sad affection. "At the time this case came up, Lila—Madame Shannon—was busy on another assignment, so I gave Alex this job. I thought it was a simple investigative assignment. It was a mistake. As you know, Monsieur Nevsky, Interpol is not a police agency in the regular sense. That is, we are basically a source and dissemination center for information on criminals who cross international borders. We don't arrest or detain people. In fact, it is illegal for us to do so. We don't even carry arms, so it's unusual for any of our personnel to meet violent ends—"

"I am sure my son was murdered, Monsieur Nevsky." Madame Shannon said it quietly but with an intensity that surprised Maxim.

"Lila, the report did not say—"

"I think Monsieur Nevsky should hear a more complete version of that report."

Fernet opened a slim file on his desk and ran a finger down the page. "For your information, Monsieur Nevsky, Monsieur Shannon was placed on board the *Athenia* as a passenger with instructions to try to

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discover the methods used by the smugglers. He was killed when he slipped on a steel ladder during some rough seas and fractured his skull."

Fernet moved his finger farther down the page. "His body was discovered about four A.M. by the ship's cook at the foot of the outside ladder that led to the main deck. The seas had been rough, and the steps and railing were wet and slippery.

"It seems that he did not die instantly," Fernet went on. "According to the cook, Monsieur Shannon was able to scrawl the Russian word for lighthouse in the mixture of blood and moisture on the deck." Fernet looked up from the file. "We only have the cook's word for this because by the time any senior officers arrived, fresh blood and rain had obscured any sign of a message."

Maxim brought his brows together. "Lighthouse?"

"Yes. *Mayuk*. It didn't seem to make sense, and though the cook is not a very reliable witness—he is a poorly educated, almost retarded Russian—at Lila's insistence we've been working on the assumption that there might have been some accuracy to his report. As yet we have not been able to associate any lighthouses in the Istanbul, Constanza, or Odessa regions with the route of the *Athenia*. It may be that 'lighthouse' is a code name for someone or someplace involved with the drug traffic."

"If you will pardon me, sir," said Maxim, "it doesn't seem likely that agent Shannon, with his dying strength, would be so cryptic."

"That may be true, but it's all the information we have now. Officially, Alex Shannon died as a result of an accident."

"Monsieur Nevsky, I do strongly believe my son was murdered," Lila Shannon said. "I cannot sleep. I won't rest until I find out if he was, and who did it." Her eyes were moist. Maxim thought she looked very feminine, very vulnerable; at the same time there was a ferocity and determination there that told Maxim he would not like to be the object of her wrath.

"If I can be of service—"

"You can be," said Fernet. "Lila has volunteered—in fact, has insisted that she be assigned to follow up on this case. She's a seasoned field agent, but I don't want to make the same mistake twice. She must have a backup. You, Monsieur Nevsky, are familiar with the Russian and Rumanian languages, and your English is excellent. Lila was raised in England and is most comfortable

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with that language. English is the language usually spoken on the *Athenia*. Alex was placed on board the *Athenia* with instructions to determine how the narcotics are being transported, and to notify us as soon as he found out. You have the same instructions." Fernet looked at Lila, then added, "As you know, our department handles smuggling. Homicide is under the direction of another department, but I think it wouldn't disturb them if I added as a secondary assignment the job of determining whether our agent, Alex, was murdered and, if so, by whom. But remember, Lila, your primary objective is to find out about the smuggling. You are too valuable to me to have you get mixed up with murderers."

"Thank you, Pierre," Lila murmured.

"Although she's not what you would call a luxury liner," continued Fernet, "the *Athenia* can carry up to twelve passengers. You and Monsieur Nevsky will board at Istanbul and travel as 'Mr. and Mrs. Nevsky' from Paris."

Maxim allowed his eyebrows to rise slightly. This was duly noted by Fernet. "Come, come, Monsieur Nevsky. Neither you nor Madame Shannon is a teenager. It is important that you be together for your mutual protection. Besides that, you must be able to exchange information freely. On a small ship like the *Athenia,* any artificial meetings or secretive discussions would be too easily detected."

Lila Shannon turned to Maxim. For the first time he noticed the beginnings of a smile on her face. "You don't have to concern yourself, Monsieur Nevsky. We won't have separate cabins, but we will have separate beds, and I promise not to bother you."

Maxim returned her smile. "I'm sure a comfortable arrangement can be made, but if we are to be husband and wife, I think you could start calling me Maxim."

Her smile broadened slightly. "How do you do, Maxim. I am Lila."

"How do you do, Lila."

Ferenet's gravel voice broke in. "Before you forget your purpose here, I will remind you that besides being friendly you must be especially cautious. If Alex's death was not an accident, the murderer has been forewarned that an investigation is taking place, and he will not hesitate to repeat his actions. You must take care of each other."

You must take care of each other, thought Maxim. It sounded almost like a benedic-

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tion. For a fleeting moment a picture of his long dead wife Anna flashed before him. Still young. Still beautiful. It was almost eighteen years since she died. It had been a long time since he had thought about her. Fernet's voice broke into Maxim's thoughts. "You will make the seven-day round trip and observe the loading and unloading operations at each port. If you discover any information, you will contact me immediately; otherwise, you will complete the trip, then fly back to Paris from Istanbul, and report to me here. Whatever you find out, you are to take no independent action. I'm sure you understand that." The last remark was said pointedly to Lila Shannon. "Interpol's first priority is to find out about the narcotics smuggling. Any action relative to the possible murder of Alex Shannon must be taken through the homicide department."

During their flight from Paris to Istanbul, they decided they would be widow and widower who had met and married while working in Paris. This Black Sea voyage was their honeymoon. Other than that, their ostensible backgrounds would be the same as their actual ones. To get ready for their shipboard experience, they decided to converse in English rather than French, since English was the working language used on the ship. From the Istanbul airport they went directly to the ship's embarkation port where, after running the usual gauntlet of officials and officious civilians, they were allowed to board the ship.

The *Athenia* was two thousand nine hundred tons of well-used steel built as a combination bulk cargo and passenger ship in 1955. Although it was freshly painted, its age clearly showed. Maxim and Lila were escorted to their cabin by a young man in a rumpled white uniform who introduced himself in Liverpool-accented English as Nigel Turner, their purser. Their two pieces of heavy luggage were carried for them by an unusually large Chinese lad who handled them like two small briefcases. It appeared that most of the officers were English, but the crew was a worldwide collection of colors, sizes, and languages.

Since Maxim and Lila had boarded early, they could lean against the railing on the main deck and watch the loading operation taking place on the dock. A thin, redheaded young man introduced himself as Mark Greeley, the ship's radioman, and offered to explain the

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activity going on on the pier below.

"All cargo is secured to pallets—those flat wooden platforms—so the forklifts can get under them to carry them to the side of the ship. It's not a job for raw muscle. Those pallet loads can weigh over a ton. The dock workers secure the bridles from our cranes to a pallet, lift them over the side of the ship, and lower them into the hold."

"How do you know where all this material is supposed to go?" inquired Lila.

"All the pallet loads are coded," Mark told her. "Do you see that pallet being swung over the hatchway now? That bundle is going to a certain factory in Odessa. I can tell by the red squares painted on the tarp covering the cargo. The next pallet is going to a warehouse in Constanza. That pallet has a blue-square label. The load with a red triangle is also going to Constanza, but to a different consignee. Each consignee has his own code design."

"How clever," Lila said.

"It's simple, but it works."

Maxim was watching the red-square coded pallet being slowly lowered into the forward hold. Fernet had told them that the cargo code for Para Clothing was a red square. It was those pallets that had to be particularly watched.

Lila and Maxim met their fellow passengers and the rest of the ship's officers at dinner that evening. The dining room was small but nicely appointed, with one long table placed in its center. There were six other passengers besides Maxim and Lila. An American couple, about the same age as Maxim and Lila, were celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary. They seemed to find it very important to convince everyone that they could really afford much more of a ship than the *Athenia* but they wanted the adventure of traveling with "real" people. There were also a pair of middle-aged English schoolteachers out for a fling and two young Scandinavian backpackers spending their summer on the way to anyplace.

The captain, a ruddy, yellow-bearded Scotsman who looked every inch the British seaman, gave what was probably his standard welcoming speech. Between witticisms that were dutifully laughed at by passengers and officers, he introduced his first mate, Arthur Stevens, and some of the other officers.

After dinner, a small bar was opened up at one end of the dining room. Maxim and Lila tried not to get involved with any of the other passengers, even though the American couple

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seemed to be trying to attach themselves to them. Instead, Lila cornered the purser, Nigel.

"I must have that dessert recipe," she told him cheerily. "Do you think I might visit your kitchen and speak to the cook?"

"You will be touring the ship in three days, madam, right after we leave Constanza," Nigel said. "The tour will include the galley, but it might be difficult to get a recipe from Feador, our cook. He is a Russian, and his English is extremely limited." Nigel tried to edge to the side, but Maxim stepped in to block his escape.

"That's no problem," Maxim smiled. "I've been away from Russia for a long time. It would be great to have a chance to practice the language again."

Nigel realized that there was no escape. "I will introduce you to Feador then," he said.

The American couple were the first to leave the party at eleven thirty. Although he was getting tired, Maxim found himself reluctant to suggest to Lila that it might be time for them to go to their cabin, but at eleven forty-five she took Maxim's hand in hers, as if it were something she had done for years, said goodnight to the remaining passengers, and steered him to the dining room door.

When their own cabin door was locked behind them, Lila sat down on one of the narrow beds. "Thank you for helping me get to the cook," she said. "I think Nigel would have gotten away otherwise." She leaned back against the bulkhead and wiggled her toes. "I think you'd better use the bathroom first," she smiled. "If I remember correctly, it takes a lady a little longer to prepare for bed than a gentleman."

It was a warm evening. Normally Maxim would have slept naked under the thin sheet, but this situation called for pajamas. After some time, Lila came out of the bathroom wearing a nightgown and slipped under the sheet of her bed. "I've left the bathroom light on and the door open a little as a night light. Goodnight, Maxim."

Maxim turned on his side and mentally slapped himself. You are sixty years old, and this is a work assignment, he thought. Get those adolescent fantasies out of your head. Aloud he said, "Goodnight, Lila."

The trip from Istanbul to Constanza took two and a half days. There was not much that Maxim and Lila could do during that time except to continue to play the older honeymoon couple. The American

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couple and the two English schoolteachers had asked Maxim if they would like to join them in an exploration of the city of Constanza when they arrived there, but Maxim explained that he had been to Constanza and that he and Lila would prefer to lounge around the ship for the short time they would be in port.

On the day of their arrival, they rose at six A.M. to have an early breakfast and watch the harbor pilot steer the *Athenia* to her assigned berth at Pier 23. It was one of the smaller piers, since the *Athenia* needed no special loading facilities. She would load and unload using her own on-board hoisting equipment. They watched from the railing of the passenger deck as the forward hatches were opened and the unloading began.

Arthur, the first mate, stood on the main deck with a clipboard in his hand, noting each consignment symbol as the pallet loads were removed from the ship. On the dock, three forklifts scurried back and forth, taking the cargo from where the hoists dropped it on the dock to an area farther back where it was stacked, two high, in neat rows, awaiting trucks to transport it to its destination. The only people on the dock beside the longshoremen were a group of three workers repairing a hole in the concrete surface of the dock. They moved with the languid motions of the dispirited workers Maxim remembered seeing when he was stationed in Odessa many years ago. He smiled as he watched one of the workers move a wheelbarrow half filled with sand from a sandpile to a mixer at a speed that guaranteed a four hour repair job would take all day. He noticed that Lila was also watching the dock repairman. Suddenly she laughed.

"When I was very young," she explained, "we lived near the border of Northern Ireland. It was very hard at that time to find work or get food in our country, so many of the villagers engaged in some smalltime smuggling across the border. There was a constant competition between the English border guards and the local smugglers. My father used to tell me the story of an Irish farmer, Paddy, who crossed the border every day to work on a farm in Northern Ireland. He was paid in potatoes, and every evening he would return with a wheelbarrow half filled with potatoes. This went on for a couple of months until the border guards were notified that Paddy was suspected of smuggling. From that day on, every

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time he returned home, the guards searched him thoroughly, even emptying the wheelbarrow on the ground and going through the potatoes one by one, but they could never find anything he might be smuggling. After a couple of weeks of this, the head of the border guards admitted defeat, and after a particularly thorough search, he said to Paddy, 'We know you're smuggling something across the border, and I could have you thrown in jail just on suspicion, but if you tell me what you've been smuggling, I'll let you go.'

" 'Wheelbarrows' was Paddy's answer."

"When I heard the story," Maxim grinned, "it was Polish smugglers and Russian border guards. But what—"

"It just struck me," Lila said. "We've been concentrating on the potatoes and ignoring the wheelbarrow."

"You'll have to explain that in a little more detail."

"I'd better make sure I'm right before I say any more. Eventually they'll finish the unloading operation, and then they'll start moving cargo from the pier to the ship. At that time we should be able to walk around the pier a little."

When the shiploading operation began, Maxim and Lila got permission from the first mate to stretch their legs on the dock. Lila guided Maxim to the area where the pallets marked with blue squares were stacked.

"I've noticed that the cargo marked with blue squares not only has colored labels but that those pallets are also marked."

"You think those containers have been opened?"

"No, not the containers—the pallets themselves."

"But they're just flat boards."

"Not really. If they were really flat, the forklifts couldn't get underneath the cargo to lift it. Take a close look at how they're made. There are four 'stringers,' that is, four pieces of lumber, four inches square and four feet long. Then there are one-inch-thick strips of wood nailed across the top and bottom of the stringers. The tines of the forklifts fit between the stringers to lift the cargo." As she was talking, Lila had maneuvered them so they were concealed from the ship by the stacked cargo. She took a small penknife from her purse and scraped away at the blue paint that had been applied to the end of one of the stringers as an identifying marker. After a few scrapes, she peered closely at the wood that had been exposed. "I was right."

"What do you see?" asked the still bewildered Maxim.

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"A change in the wood grain. Take a look. You see, Maxim, I realized that it's possible to drill a hole at least two inches in diameter down the center of these stringers. That would give you a hole two inches square and four feet long. That's a lot of volume. You could then wrap narcotics in plastic tubes, insert them in the hole, and plug up the ends. The dab of paint, supposedly used as a marker, neatly conceals the difference in the wood grain of the plug. If you do that to only one center stringer of the four, you won't appreciably weaken the pallet, and you can use them over and over again."

"And there are dozens of pallets going in every week," added Maxim with a touch of awe in his voice. "So this load is suspect, too."

"We will still have to notify Fernet—"

"Not so fast, Lila." Maxim scratched the side of his face for a moment. "There is another part to our assignment, you know. A couple of disconnected ideas have been bouncing around in my head for a while now. It may be a big stretch of logic, but I'd like to talk to you about some thoughts before we call Fernet."

In their cabin, Maxim made sure the door was locked, then seated himself on his bed near the porthole and as far away from the door as possible so their conversation wouldn't be overheard. Lila sat down opposite him and leaned forward attentively.

"That business about the word 'lighthouse' has been bothering me since I heard it," began Maxim. "The fact that Interpol could turn up nothing . . . and that it meant nothing to Alex's contacts there . . . But when you said what you did on the pier—"

Lila looked confused. "What was that?"

"You said let's call Fernet."

"So?"

"Don't you see? If Alex was indeed murdered, it probably was because he had discovered something about the smuggling operation—probably in much the same way you did. He would have had the same reaction as you, but without the knowledge that there was someone on board the ship who was connected to the smugglers. He would have gone immediately to the radio room to send a cable to Fernet explaining what he had found."

"But Interpol received no cable."

"That's right. And that's why I think my theory is right, because the radioman's name is Mark."

"So?"

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"So, in the Cyrillic alphabet that the Russians use, except for the letter *R* being written in reverse, *mayuk,* the Russian word for lighthouse, is spelled 'mark.' The reversed *R* would have meant as little to the cook as it would to you if you had seen a reversed *S* written by a child. Alex actually wrote the name of his murderer — 'Mark.' "

Maxim watched as a whole parade of expressions raced across Lila's face. Doubt, surprise, shock, anger, and finally, sadness. "You might be right, Maxim," she said slowly, "but there's no way we can prove it."

"I'm afraid you're right. When the authorities receive the information we can give them about the pallets, they'll break up the smuggling ring all right, and they might even implicate Mark, but only as a minor cog in the ring, not as a murderer. Still, there might be something we can do about it." Lila looked hopefully at him. "I've tried to figure out what the function of a member of a smuggling gang would be on board a ship," continued Maxim. "After all, the contraband was safely stored away, so there was nothing he would have to do about it while the ship was in transit."

"Maybe his job was to see that the loading and unloading of the marked pallets took place smoothly."

"Maybe—but a more important job has to be done. You've figured out how the narcotics were being transported into the countries, but how were the payments for the narcotics getting out?"

"Oh," said Lila. "So he must be the conduit."

"If he is, well, I have a suggestion. It might mean bending the rules a little, but the result could take care of Mark to your satisfaction."

During the trip from Constanza to Odessa, it was more difficult for Maxim to play the part of the carefree, older newlywed. He felt himself tense up every time Lila and Mark met at mealtime, or casually on deck, but Lila was a pro. She even let the tour of the galley go by without a word to the unsmiling Feador. Her feelings never surfaced. Maxim felt sure that as far as Mark was concerned Lila was just another lady passenger enjoying her second chance at married life.

In line with their plan, they did not go immediately into Odessa to sightsee with the other passengers. Instead, they spent their time enjoying the cool breezes on the passenger deck while taking turns watch-

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ing the loading operations on the dock below.

"There he goes now," said Lila to Maxim, who was relaxing in a deck chair. Maxim hopped up to the rail, and both of them watched as Mark, casually swinging a small duffle bag, threaded his way among the workers and cargo. He headed towards a quiet area near the stern of the ship, where piles of material waiting for shipment had created a labyrinth of streets and avenues on the broad dock. For a while Mark leaned against a stack of spooled wire and watched the men on the dock as they unloaded *Athenia's* cargo. Occasionally he looked at his watch. At precisely two P.M., he suddenly turned, walked into one of the "avenues," and disappeared from sight behind the piles of stacked material. There was nothing Maxim and Lila could do except wait. In no more than three minutes he reappeared, coming out from behind the same pile of stacked material. He sauntered back towards the ship, still swinging the duffel bag, which seemed to have gained some weight.

"He didn't even have to leave the dock area," commented Maxim. "The bosses at Para Clothing must have greased the way for the payment to get past the guards at the dock gates. Well, that's as much as we can do here now." He took Lila's hand. "Let's see if we can get some transportation and take a tour of Odessa."

The return trip from Odessa to Istanbul took a little over two days. No one but Maxim noticed that Lila seemed a slightly different person from the one who had taken the first half of the trip. She seemed happier—younger. She was acting the part of the loving wife on her honeymoon so well that at times Maxim felt almost embarrassed, but when the door to their cabin closed, Lila let it be known that the curtain to the play was down for the day.

On the evening before their arrival in Istanbul, Maxim and Lila left the dining room immediately after dinner, saying that they wanted to have one last look at the setting sun of the Black Sea. Normally they would have stayed to oversee the bridge game that took place every evening between Mark, Nigel, and the two Americans. As soon as they left the dining room, they went to their cabin where they picked up an empty shopping bag. They checked to see that no one was around, then walked forward to the ladder that led to the upper deck where Mark's combination radio shack and cabin was lo-

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cated. Maxim unhooked the chain across the ladder that held the sign "Crew Members Only" and rehooked it behind them. The sound of their footsteps as they climbed the ladder was covered by the dull chugging of the ship's engines. Lila's handbag held a small assortment of hardware that made picking the lock to Mark's cabin a minute's work. The bridge game would keep Mark busy for the next two hours, but Lila kept a lookout on deck while Maxim searched the cabin. He finally emerged, carrying the now bulging shopping bag.

When they returned to their cabin, Maxim emptied the shopping bag on his bed. Out poured a colorful display of neatly bundled packages of German marks, American dollars, Swiss and French francs, English pounds, and Japanese yen.

Maxim let out a small gasp. "What do you think this would add up to?"

Lila looked at the currency with loathing. "It doesn't matter. We are going to do what we decided to do. It was your idea." She carefully put the packages of money back into the shopping bag, added the two heavy glass ashtrays that were in their room, tied the shopping bag closed, and handed the bundle to Maxim. Maxim gave a small, sad sigh and took it outside. The white spot of foam it made as it hit the black water quickly disappeared in the darkness.

Two days later, Pierre Fernet welcomed Lila and Maxim into his office, where tea and cake for three awaited them. "Congratulations on a great job, you two," he smiled. "Your first assignment together, and you completed it very well." Fernet poured the tea. "Our offices in Istanbul and Bucharest have relayed your information about the pallets to the local police departments, and I've notified the Ukrainian police. They were very thankful. I won't be too surprised if those newly formed Russian states decide to join Interpol soon." He picked up his teacup. "But I'm sorry you weren't able to find out anything about Alex's death."

"Pierre," Lila said, "there was something that wasn't in our report that we think you might be interested in—if we can tell you off the record."

"Off the record? Yes, I am interested."

Lila told Fernet of Maxim's analysis of Alex's message and of their subsequent actions aboard the ship. When she had finished, Fernet's round face

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puckered with a questioning look.

"You could have turned the money over to the Turkish authorities. You didn't have to destroy it," he said.

"True," said Maxim. "But if the money were turned over to the authorities, it wouldn't be long before the narcotics traffickers found out about it. This way, when Mark finds the money gone, and no way to account for it, he'll realize that his bosses will assume he took it. There are no excuses that would be acceptable to that bunch. He'll have to try to 'disappear.' "

"And," continued Lila, "with the smuggling method exposed, the money unaccounted for, and Mark gone, the 'big boys' of the smuggling ring are going to put two and two together. They'll assume that Mark sold out to the authorities and took off with their money. Their assumptions will be wrong, of course, but that won't help Mark any. Those smugglers are going to make sure that Mark pays—with interest—no matter where he goes. I'm sorry if I sound cynical, Pierre, but in this case I think the criminals will dispense a more accurate level of justice than the English courts could, under the circumstances."

Pierre Fernet leaned back in his chair. His puzzled look had been replaced by a grin. "Criminal justice, eh?—with justice dispensed by the criminals. Well, what you two did was definitely not by the book, but as far as this department is concerned, you've fulfilled your assignments. It's lucky for you that Interpol is a private organization and not part of the Turkish government." Fernet took a slow sip of his tea. "Lila, remind me never to let you get angry with me."

"I could never be angry with you. You let me have this assignment, and you introduced me to a wonderful partner." Lila turned to Maxim. "I hope we work together again—soon."

Pierre Fernet looked at the couple in front of him sipping their tea and smiled. They looked like anyone's youngish grandparents. "You will," said Fernet. "I am quite certain you will."

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Never Bite the Hand That . . .

by Don Marshall

"Mr. Nickolas," called young Andrew as the mortician tamped the last shovelful of earth over his most recent customer.

"Mr. Nickolas, is this grave marker correct? It reads kind of odd."

"Odd, Andrew? In what way?"

"Well," Andrew hesitated, fingered his celluloid collar so as not to appear stupid. "Uh, it reads,

DR. ACULA
COUNT

BELOVED SON OF EUROPEAN
ROYAL FAMILY

DIED 1871
DIED 1873
DIED 1876

Finis

"Isn't that a bit strange, Mr. Nickolas?"

"Well, yes, Andrew. I must admit I took some liberties with his name. It should read DRACULA; however, not wishing to alarm folks hereabout, I carved the first two letters to suggest a medical background.

"One might accurately describe him as adept in the art of hemotherapy, a method of blood transfusion. The latter portion of his name, *acula,* seemed appropriate . . . *acu* is a Latin adjective meaning sharp, needlelike, or pointed. In this particular case, *la* reads as an exclamation of wonder or astonishment rather than the sixth note in the diatonic scale.

"Though some claim *dracula* is actually *draco,* a Greek noun meaning dragon, I prefer my version. Now, Andrew, let us get our

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shovels back into the hearse and head for home."

"Yes, Mr. Nickolas, but the name is not what I meant. It's all those different dates."

"Why? Is there something wrong with them?"

"Well, Mr. Nickolas, but how many times . . ."

"Oh, you mean how many times can one person die? Well, Andrew, since it's a long ride back to town, I might as well tell you."

Simon Nickolas, almost well-liked mortician of Bear Valley, California, unobtrusively sampled his flask, settled back in the upholstered seat of his ornate C-spring hearse, and clucked at the horses.

"It all started when I, ever on the lookout for a bargain, noticed an advertisement for European coffins at reduced prices. They were part of a consignment to Stockton, England, but were misdirected to Stockton, California. Since the shipping company was unable to locate the consignee, I bought them at a bargain price.

"Much to my astonishment, I later discovered that one of the containers was already occupied."

"Gee whiz, Mr. Nickolas, all that time aboard ship, it must have been . . ."

"Actually not, Andrew. The cadaver, for lack of a better name, appeared in remarkably good condition—well dressed, cutaway, tails, and wrapped in a rather expensive cloak. I was in the act of removing said overgarment when I was suddenly seized by the wrist."

"You mean . . ." Andrew gulped.

"Yes, the occupant of the coffin . . ." Nickolas mused, half aloud. "A rather well-constructed coffin, I must admit, satin lined, solid silver handles, mortised . . ."

"No, Mr. Nickolas," Andrew stammered, "I . . . I mean, uh, who, uh, *what,* grabbed you?"

"Andrew, in our profession we never, I repeat never, show undue excitement. Proper deportment is essential."

Young Andrew blushed at the gentle reproof yet reveled in the words "our profession." He was almost an equal.

The hearse swayed gently while negotiating a curve in the dirt road. The horses kept perfect cadence.

"Count Dracula, as he introduced himself, was not dead, at least in the usual sense, and had chosen this novel method of transportation from his native land to new diggings, so to speak."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Andrew, if you persist in interrupting . . ."

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"Sorry, sir."

"Keen observer that I am, I immediately sensed something strange about this . . . ahhh . . . *person*. He looked rather anemic. He had, in the words of the Bard of Avon, 'a lean and hungry look.'

"Upon noticing the other coffins spread about the room, he gave me an evil smile and immediately proposed a business partnership. 'It seems,' he said, 'we have similar pursuits.'

"In the meantime, he said, he would like to take a look about town and fluttered off, like a bat, you know. I retired for the night. He must have returned before dawn, since I found him fast asleep in his strange bed when I arose.

"I, of course, wasn't interested in a partnership, but before I could refuse the offer, Mr. Sideburn from the Shortbranch Hotel knocked and informed me that one of his patrons had expired during the night . . . a traveling salesman, I think he said, or a Republican. I forget which.

"At any rate, while preparing the body for burial, I noticed two strange puncture wounds on the neck. I got to thinking about Mr. Dracula.

"I opened his polished walnut abode and, sure enough, there he lay, sound asleep, rosy as a peach with a satisfied smirk on his face. I did the only honorable thing."

"Gee whiz, Mr. Nickolas, what was that?"

"Why, I buried that bloodsucker along with the Republican."

"But, Mr. Nickolas, how come the other dates . . ."

"Things were quiet for some time after the event. Then I was summoned to Banker Hardbristle's home. It seems he had expired during the night while counting money extracted from Widow Brown. The sheriff said Hardbristle died of natural causes. There was no evidence of foul play, the money still lay in plain sight, and the room appeared undisturbed.

"Nothing appeared suspicious to me, either, until I found the two small punctures on his neck. Almost two years had psssed, yet here was evidence that Dracula was again at work."

"Gee, Mr. Nickolas," Andrew shivered, "I hope we make it home before dark."

"The following day, after the ceremony, I delayed until the mourners left, which didn't take too long. He was a banker, you know."

Andrew nodded, determined not to interrupt yet all the while thinking about those puncture wounds. The shadows on the road grew longer.

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"I found, much to my surprise, that Count Dracula had been happily tunneling from one new grave to another. For the last two months, however, there had been a dearth of deaths—we traced it back to a patent medicine man who came through town—and the batman's appetite got the better of him.

"I was quite fearful of what havoc he could create about the countryside, so I took his coffin back to the shop, knowing that he had to retire to it before dawn."

"How did you know that, Mr. Nickolas?"

"His servant, a mousy little chap named Renfrew who had a disgusting habit of eating insects, had arrived in town looking for the lost shipment. He had been waiting in vain at dockside in England.

"Fearful of facing his master's wrath, he was only too happy to tell me of the fiend's weaknesses. Together we rode back to the cemetery, where we sealed each tunnel by erecting crosses at the entrances, two to each, sort of a . . . heh, heh . . . double cross, you might say. We lowered the coffin with its undead occupant and quickly planted garlic over the entire grave."

"Gee whiz, Mr. Nickolas, what was the garlic for?"

"According to Mr. Renfrew, vampires have an aversion to garlic. I can't say as I blame them. It worked, too. I felt comfortable with the count safely tucked beneath a blanket of that pungent herb. That was the second burial."

Andrew noticed the shadows of night, not falling as many people say but rising, rising from the ominous depressions in the fields and sinister ruts in the road. The fingers of darkness were growing longer, reaching . . . reaching . . .

He shivered again, almost fearful but he had to ask. "And the other date? The 1876?"

"Well, Andrew, you know Mr. and Mrs. Paparazzo, who own the clothing store in town. You also know she makes the finest spaghetti, along with other Italian dishes, in the entire county. Inadvertently, one of her more popular dishes sabotaged my entire plan."

"Yes, sir, but do you mean . . ." Andrew hesitated, listening for strange flutterings from the shadowy copse along the road.

"Exactly. As the saying goes, 'A nose by any other name will smell the same.' While attending the funeral of their worthless son-in-law Smedly the inventor, who was killed in an explosion while demonstrating Smedly the Inventor's Non-explosive Lamp

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Oil, the Paparazzos discovered the aromatic growth of garlic covering the resting place of Count Dracula. Its removal, done only to appease the palates of Mrs. Paparazzo's spaghetti loving family, freed the evildoer from his pungent compound, and once again mysterious deaths prevailed in our beautiful valley."

The undertaker reined the horses to a stop and directed Andrew to light the carriage lamps front and back.

"But it's dark and I'll have to get down on the ground."

"Very astute, Andrew."

Before the mortician finished two swallows from his flask, the four lamps shone brightly and Andrew sat breathlessly back in his seat.

"Now to resume my story. Though my business increased dramatically, it necessitated my taking the bull by the tail and looking it right in the eye. Dracula pestered me nightly to join forces with him, but that snake-in-the-grass was barking up the wrong tree. I still had another foot up my sleeve.

"I took his coffin back to my workshop. 'Von Helsing,' he sneered at me, exposing his sharp teeth. He always called me Von Helsing, a former opponent I suppose. 'Why are we fighting? California is the fruit basket of the world. We have a whole valley ready for plucking. Yet you insist on letting me starve to death; not that I can, of course, for immortality does have its advantages. I give you all the business you can handle, yet I know you brought my rollaway back here for a reason. You have another foot up your sleeve, I can sense it.'

"He retired, leaving me with this terrible dilemma. Business had never been better, I admit. Regrettably, if it kept up, there would be no one left to bury. I had to act fast."

The jiggling rays from the carriage lamps set the roadside leaves to twitching like bat wings. Young Andrew hunched his shoulders and clutched his lapels tighter about his throat.

"Finally, in desperation, I seized upon the last option related to me by Renfrew while he was crunching a particularly large beetle."

"What was that, Mr. Nickolas?" asked the apprentice, glancing over his shoulder into the darkness behind.

"A stake through the heart. The absolute solution to the depredations of this abdominal creature. In triumph, I carted him and his bier back to his place of interment and covered him up . . . unfortunately, that, too, failed."

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"Gee whiz, Mr. Nickolas, I would think a stake through the heart would kill anybody."

"True, under normal conditions, but here we were dealing with immortality and . . . termites."

"Termites?"

"Yes, the little beasties went to work the moment he was in the ground. They ate the stake in its entirety, thus unwittingly freeing the count to go batting about on his nefarious rounds."

"How did you finally bury him?"

"I didn't. Ahhh . . . here we are, Andrew. You may unhitch the horses while I warm up the lasagna from Mrs. Paparazzo."

"Well. That was a good meal, if I do say so. Andrew, your sense of security is commendable, but after locking all doors and windows, looking through the cupboards and under the beds, do you have to draw the curtains, too?"

"But you said that Count Dracula is still . . ."

"Oh, not to worry. You see I finally arrived at a solution that satisfied everyone. The Paparazzos felt rather guilty when they found their culinary efforts had caused so much trouble. At my request, they were only too happy to contribute several gallons of their very best red wine to implement the plan . . . the idea was to get Mr. Dracula to imbibe. The entire town agreed that Mute Willie would be the ideal bait."

"Mute Willie?"

"Yes. Because of his chronic laryngitis, Willie always wore a hot water bottle about his neck. Everyone else put on a garlic necklace, and I filled Willie's hot water bottle with Mrs. Paparazzo's home-made wine.

"The plan worked admirably. Mute Willie remained unhurt, his 'wounds,' if you will, were readily healed by applying a dab of India gum rubber, and Mr. Dracula got so drunk he passed out cold. The townspeople carried him back here, and I quickly performed the extractions."

"All of 'em?" Andrew's eyes widened.

"Every last one," Mr. Nickolas said. "Andrew, I left my Hungarian cloak in the hearse. In the pocket you will find a medicinal flask. Would you fetch it, please?"

Andrew did as bidden. Somehow the dark did not seem so dark now. He smiled, then laughed out loud as he thought of the frustration of Count Dracula *gumming* it through all eternity.

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"Uh, whatever happened to poor Mr. Renfrew?" he asked on his return.

"Oh, he became a very successful businessman in San Francisco. Specialized in insect and rodent extermination, the last I heard."

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

The ship with red sails was the *Anger,* under Captain Mack (known as "Scar"). Inasmuch as he is Supreme Commander of the Fellowship of Freebooters, presumably they got the treasure on Skeleton Island.

SHIP	SAILS	CAPTAIN	NICKNAME	WEAPON	BAND
Carnage	black	Ned, Sup. Com.	"Vitriol"	pistol	Brotherhood of Buccaneers
Death	gray	Oliver	"Undertaker"	dirk	
Evil	blue	Louie	"Rat"	musket	
Anger	red	Mack, Sup. Com.	"Scar"	cutlass	Fellowship of Freebooters
Blood	golden	Paul	"Tusk"	saber	
Fate	yellow	Karl	"Weasel"	hook	

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Thanks to Scott Turow and John Grisham, lots of us now feel quite familiar around the inner sanctums of powerful and prestigious law firms. Still, can one ever get enough of a good thing? Steve Martini's **Compelling Evidence** (Jove, $5.99) certainly stands out among the plethora of wannabes. Paul Madriani, former high-powered and high-priced attorney, opens his sympathetic first-person narrative with an eyewitness account of a state execution. That grabs a reader's throat, no question, and Martini never lets go—not as he defends a former lover accused of murdering her husband, not even as he tries to repair the damage to his marriage which that affair caused. The plea bargainings, the billings, the boardroom decisions—in Martini's hand, it all rings with authenticity, and smacks of suspense.

Paperback originals seem to get better and better every year, probably due to the competition now to get published at all. **The January Corpse** (Onyx, $3.99) by Neil Albert is certainly worthy of attention. Dave Garrett was an attorney who loved his wife so much that he cheated on her bar exam for her—and got caught. Now he's disbarred and divorced, working smalltime cases for his former peers in Philadelphia. This one should have been easy: verify that an attorney who's been missing seven years is legally dead. But the case turns out to be a rock that Garrett has unwittingly turned over, and what crawls out seems to be an old murder, drug money, and mob connections . . . and Lisa, the dead man's sister, who connects to Garrett the way no other person has since his troubles began. There's a nifty, unexpected twist at the heart of the case that has this reader anticipating Albert's next novel.

Robert Barnard has long entertained mystery readers with his

Illustration by Istvan Banyai

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novels, both series and non-series, written under his own name. Now he's added **To Die Like a Gentleman** (St. Martin's, $16.99), published under the pen name of Bernard Bastable. This is a cosy period piece, set in Victoria's England of 1842 at a stately home called Elmstead Court. Barnard has created a highly decorative set and peopled it with a cast of characters whom we readily associate with British manor house murders. There are the tyrannical head of household and his conniving manservant (and the manservant's Machiavellian mother, no less). There are Sir Richard's respectable wife, the flirtatious village doctor, the meek and orphaned governess, and the Uriah Heapish male secretary. Add to this houseparty the sensitive adolescent son, the headstrong daughter, and her two pretty younger sisters . . . sound familiar? Barnard, however, isn't content with leaving us with our illusions regarding these comforting stock characters. Through a liberal use of diaries and letters, readers get to see behind the facades of this Victorian squire and his household, and there are more than a few surprises up to the very end. The blurb promises readers that Barnard/Bastable is working on a second book even as we speak.

Ron Handberg's *Savage Justice* told the story of a Twin Cities TV anchorman's investigation of a powerful judge. In **Cry Vengeance** (Birch Lane Press, $18.95) he returns to the same newsroom but introduces protagonist Jessica Babbitt, a novice TV reporter. A man is brutally and perhaps symbolically murdered. Because she can't get his death out of her mind, she begins to dig into the story on her own time. There's the ubiquitous budding romance and a plot setup that may seem implausible (at least, I hope it's implausible). Still, watching a young reporter work with informants and the local police—all off the record—and seeing how the management of a TV station decides when and how to break the story legally provide their own fascination. Handberg keeps up a brisk pace in the telling.

Looking for an amateur woman sleuth who has a great sense of humor, loads of common sense, a natural aversion to violence, a love-hate relationship with her mother, a handsome cop boyfriend, a hometown she knows and loves well, and an English classroom full of spoiled kids five days a week? If so, then you really must pick up one of Anthony Award-winning Gillian Roberts' mysteries featuring Amanda Pepper. In **With Friends Like These . . .** (Ballantine, $18), Amanda is coerced into accompanying her mother to a big reunion party that Lyle Zacharias is throwing for himself. Lyle is a Philadelphia boy who made good, first on Broadway, then

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as the creator of a spinoff to a long-running TV series. Now he's fifty, and in suitable "gone Hollywood" fashion, he's invited everyone to come back to the old neighborhood for his birthday bash, "to heal what needs healing and to drink a toast to auld lang syne"—or so his invitation reads. Of course, sitting down to dinner with a tableful of everyone you've ever injured proves to be not Lyle's best idea but, rather, his last one. And as the cops zero in on Amanda's dizzy mom for their number one suspect, she's forced to take up her sideline as amateur private eye. I look to Roberts for witty dialogue, memorable characters, and a snappy plot, and with *With Friends Like These* . . . I had to look no further.

Her fans have waited several years now for Martha Grimes to bring back her British sleuthing team of Richard Jury and Melrose Plant. The time has come with **The Horse You Came In On** (Knopf, $21), and the old gang is surely back, although briefly, in their booth at the tavern in Long Piddleton. But Jury's supposed to be on holiday, working through what feels like a case of job burnout—and what can he accomplish investigating a sudden death in America, for heaven's sake? No matter. Next stop is Baltimore, and the tavern that lends (as always) its name to this book's title. Sergeant Wiggins carries his usual baggage of strange allergies and supposed symptoms to our shores, while Melrose provides amusement as he is shown the sights by a chatty taxi driver and learns the game of football. Jury, meanwhile, pursues the investigation in his more orthodox manner, suggesting to this reader that perhaps, after all, he may be suffering from burnout. Or maybe Martha Grimes is.

Phyllis Whitney has been entertaining mystery readers for decades; her latest is **Star Flight** (Crown, $20), set in the beautiful mountains of North Carolina, on the resort-dotted Lake Lure. Whitney opens her tale with a prologue, the tragic story of star-crossed movie stars shooting there on location back in 1938. More than fifty years later, the daughter of that couple's illegitimate child comes to Lake Lure for the first time. But Lauren is drawn by more than her curiosity and her desire to meet the famous actor-grandfather who has never acknowledged her. Her filmmaker husband died at Lake Lure while researching a documentary, and now she's received an anonymous note that says his death was not an accident. Whitney weaves threads of romance, suspense, and even a glint of magic into this lush gothic tale, all set against a backdrop of natural beauty, wealth, and glamor. It's a formula sure to please her many fans.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Woody Allen's **Manhattan Murder Mystery** is certainly aptly named: it's a murder mystery that takes place in Manhattan. While it's a tribute of sorts to films *noir,* it doesn't adopt the style. It maintains instead an up-to-date style and a breezy pace, which, when combined with Allen's neurotic wit, makes for a funny and entertaining movie.

Allen and Diane Keaton are the *Annie Hall*-like Larry and Carol Lipton, whose only child has left home for college. He's a book editor; she talks about opening a restaurant. The two have fast become a cliched, boring, middle-aged couple. "We're not turning into a pair of comfortable old shoes, are we?" Keaton asks.

But when an elderly neighbor they've just met suddenly drops dead of a heart attack, those are gumshoes Keaton tries on for size. And she likes the fit.

After seeing *Double Indemnity,* Keaton begins wondering about the death of their neighbor. "She never mentioned a heart condition," she says after "grieving" widower Paul House (Jerry Adler) explains how his Lillian was suddenly stricken.

Keaton tells Allen that the bereaved Mr. House seemed "just a little too cheerful, a little too perky."

Keaton finds an ally in Ted (Alan Alda), a recently divorced playwright friend of the Liptons, who becomes a co-conspirator theorist. The two trade late-night phone calls and daytime rendezvous to share their latest murder theories.

The idea of a murder gradually becomes more real as the plot progresses.

Even Allen, who when his

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wife charges, "We could be living next door to a murderer," responds, "New York is a melting pot," is eventually drawn into the freelance murder investigation being conducted by his wife and his best friend.

Although this film does fall into the murder mystery category, there is little or no suspense. But that doesn't really take away from the fun.

Once enough evidence is in place to convince even the fearful and skeptical Allen that there may have been a murder next door, there is really only one suspect—Mr. House. The trio of intrepid investigators must find a way to trap him into revealing his dastardly deed. Along the way, they're joined by Marcia Fox, a sexy author played with gusto by Anjelica Huston.

The police have little to do with the goings-on, since the whole idea of the murder of an elderly woman who was said by paramedics to have suffered a fatal coronary appears fanciful.

So it's up to the quartet of truly private investigators to crack the case. They come up with a cockamamie scheme to blackmail Mr. House into admitting the murder. It includes a hilarious, edited taped phone call to House that could have been patched together by Richard Nixon with the help of Rosemary Woods.

When the murder plot finally does unravel, a fantastic scene takes place backstage at a movie revival house that recalls the Hall of Mirrors climax in *The Lady from Shanghai*. It also recalls Allen's own *Play It Again, Sam,* in which "reel life" and "real life" become intertwined.

The cast is excellent. Allen and Keaton, together again, have a few more wrinkles than they did in their *Annie Hall* days, but their back-and-forth banter remains endearing and funny.

Manhattan Murder Mystery is perhaps mostly a romantic comedy. In fact, take notice of the name of a movie book on Allen's bedside nightstand.

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THE STORY THAT WON

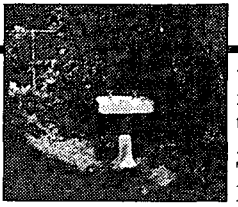


Photo by Karen E. Newton

The August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California. Honorable mentions go to Cynthia Beckton; Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; B. Jackson of El Cajon, California; Tonnie Goddard Moon of Chattanooga, Tennessee; Mary Frakes of Lancaster, California; Mark A. Humphreys of Cedar Ridge, California; Christi Dennis of DuBois, Pennsylvania; Robert S. Mulholland of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; Elizabeth Gonzales of Monahans, Texas; James Sadlemyer of Odessa, Saskatchewan, Canada; Erika C. Woods of Bernalillo, New Mexico; and Julie G. DeGroat of Theresa, New York.

SETTINGS by Virginia Thompson

"I believe new settings can bring out the beauty of everyday objects. Unfortunately," continued Jeff Mansfield to police officer Mike Kersey, "someone disagrees."

Fragments of brightly enameled metal lay by Jeff's front sidewalk. "This was a 1930's breadbox which I had restored as a mailbox. The vandal also ruined my sidewalk border." A strip of brick-patterned kitchen linoleum, its soft shine reflecting marigolds, ran along the concrete walkway. It had been repeatedly slashed. A note lying nearby read, "Breadboxes and linoleum belong in kitchens."

Two weeks later Kersey stared up at the sledgehammered body of an old VW bug. Painted bright red with black polka dots, it had sported curtains, front-window broomstraw eyelashes, and ruffled petunias in its open hood and trunk. It was affixed to a plywood treehouse base. "My grandkids loved it," sighed Jeff.

A note read, "Cars belong in garages."

"Next time I'll catch him," vowed Jeff. He stared thoughtfully at his elegant old pedestal-sink birdbath. It was surrounded by black and white floor tiles which ran in a path out the garden gate.

Two weeks later Officer Kersey followed black footprints from the newly shattered sink into a nearby home and arrested the vandal. Afterward, Kersey found Jeff clearing up the debris. Wearing plastic gloves he was carefully placing black tiles in a garbage bag. "My grandchildren can visit when I'm done," he said.

He waved a black tile at Kersey, "Felt pads soaked in indelible ink belong where kids can't touch them."

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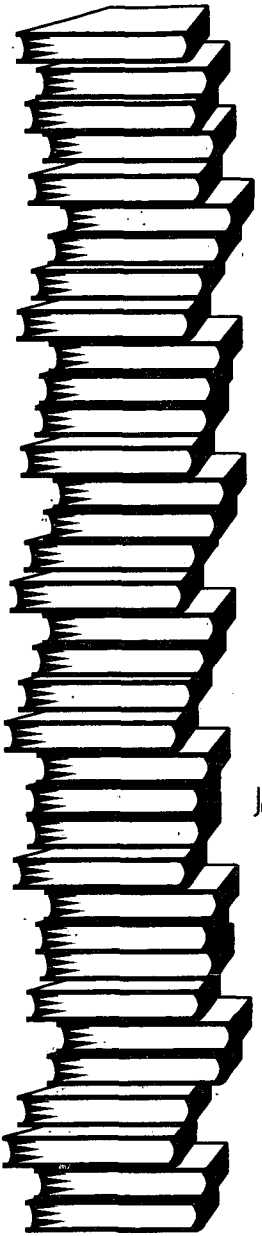
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